



Making a Difference



2011

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2012

The Little Things

Erin Burke Brown
Program Director

"Everyone is trying to accomplish something big, not realizing that life is made up of little things." -Frank Howard Clark

Each year VCU AmeriCorps embarks on a journey to improve the literacy of children in Richmond. We take this journey supported by the principals, reading specialists, and teachers of Richmond Public Schools that provide us with guidance and tools to accomplish our goals. And what a big goal it is! Helping children improve their literacy is much more than pointing to words on a page or studying vocabulary words. True literacy is about helping children develop not only the skills to read well, but a passion for lifelong reading that will help them be successful in elementary school and beyond.

With such a big goal looming over our heads it is easy to become overwhelmed when the results we seek do not magically appear. Many VCU AmeriCorps members get frustrated when they work with a child for weeks and seem to see little progress in their reading skills. They ask the questions, "What am I doing wrong? Why can't I help this student?" Despite their frustrations, members continue serving their students day after day and week after week. They begin to realize that they have a wealth of resources at their disposal and seek out people with more experience and knowledge to assist them with meeting the needs of their students. Helping children learn to read is not about the volunteer, it is about the student.

Using this student-centered approach has helped members understand the importance of celebrating the little things. Hi-fives for getting one more question right on the weekly spelling test than last week, stickers for using a difficult vocabulary word in a sentence, and a thumbs up for answering a difficult comprehension question are all steps on the journey to literacy. Sometimes we cannot see the finish line in October, but with dedication and commitment to our schools and students, we press on. By the time we have our March and April trainings I begin to see the fruits of our labor come to pass as members' furrowed brows of frustration turn to smiles of success. It is usually right about this time of the year that all of those little things begin to add up to something big.

It is also at that time that we are reminded as a corps that not a single tutoring lesson is wasted when it results in even one child becoming a lifelong reader.

- **What is AmeriCorps?** AmeriCorps is a national service program through which more than 75,000 people of all ages and backgrounds support efforts to resolve community problems each year. More at www.americorps.gov.
- **What is America Reads?** The America Reads Initiative is a response to a challenge set forth by President Clinton in 1996 to "ensure that every child can read independently by the end of third grade."
- **What is ARCH?** ARCH stands for America Reads in the City of Richmond and Henrico County. It is the umbrella name for the AmeriCorps and America Reads programs housed at VCU.

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Magical Moments

Theodore “Teddy” Dubinsky Team Leader at E.S.H. Greene Elementary

During our service year each team leader and member was given the task to take a select few readers and guide them along the path to literacy. We were privileged to serve these students as mentors and tutors. It is easy for team members along the way to lose focus or to get distracted by other obligations; however the way to make it through such a long and arduous journey is to focus on the small moments that serving as an educator can provide. This year I was given the opportunity to not only witness, but help facilitate some of these small moments.

The small moments were often little things, like receiving high fives from the kids in the hallway, or watching the kids as they tried to mimic your actions. This year, I also had the rare opportunity to see something I feel very few educators are afforded the chance to see: the moment a young child actually understood the thing they were working on for the first time. As AmeriCorps reading coaches, we work in small group or on-on-one tutoring situations. This provides us with the opportunity to not only get to know our students, but to watch their progression.

Over my service year, I worked closely with a student, a young girl of about 6 years, whose native language is Spanish, which certainly presented its challenges. I can only imagine what it is like for a student whose second language is English, being expected to meet the same testing benchmarks as other students. That is why it was so great for me to be able to spend that extra time working with her in our tutoring sessions.

One afternoon, my student was working with me in the library. She had managed over the recent weeks to progress to the point where she could string her phonemes together. All of a sudden, she read the silliest sentence I had ever heard, something akin to “Sam is a happy clam.” Then, all of a sudden, she looked up and it was as if a light had switched on in a dark room. She said, “I know what this means.” I replied, “That’s great, would you like to read more.” And with a goofy grin, she nodded.

For the remainder of the school year I saw my student progress exponentially. She was one of the hardest working in her class and even became a tutor for her fellow students’ reading. I know that part of that success was a result of my efforts in our AmeriCorps program. That extra help I was able to provide made a difference for this student. It is the magical moments like these that made the year worthwhile, and make me proud to serve as a VCU AmeriCorps member.



Pictured above: VCU AmeriCorps Team Leaders (James, Tassy, Teddy, Todd, Sabrina, Clarissa, and Heather) with their Field Coordinator Cheryl Jennings at Richmond's Jefferson Hotel.

“I love AmeriCorps because of the children. I not only get a chance to make an impact, but the children also make an impact on me!”

-Tassy Mason, Team Leader at Woodville Elementary



Team Francis hard at work supporting their school-wide reading day!

Quotes from the Field

Cheryl Jennings
Field Coordinator

As Field Coordinator, I spend a large portion of my time at the various sites ensuring that our partners and members are supported. Of the many years I have been a part of VCU AmeriCorps as both a member and employee, I have never had so many compliments from the sites we serve. Below are just a few of the many wonderful things that have been said about our members and program:

"I have enjoyed working my AmeriCorps Tutor this year. My students showed great improvements and increased their fluency and spelling by nearly 75%."

-George Mason Elementary

"We are happy to have the AmeriCorps team. They are enhancing our language arts block and intervention."

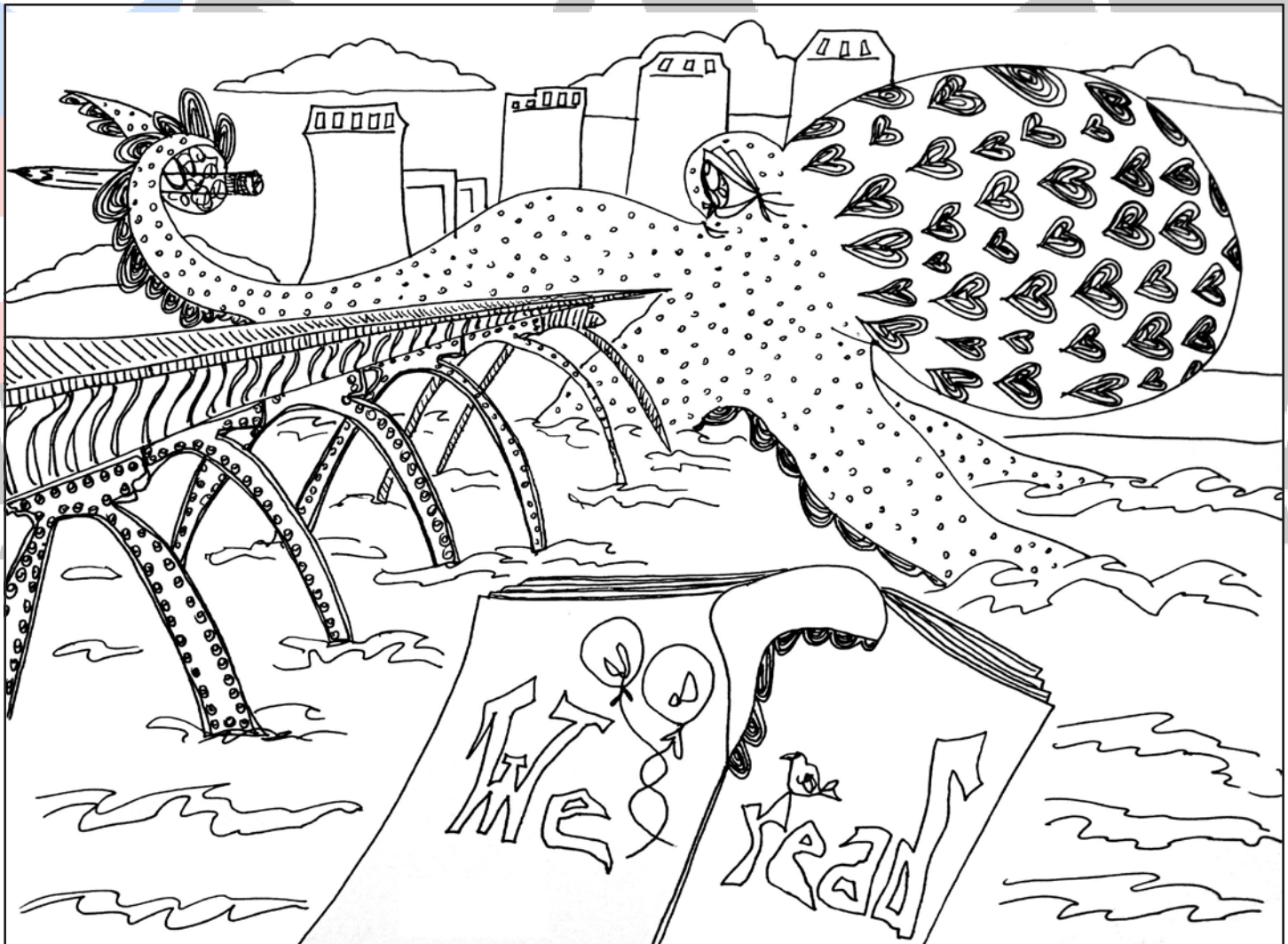
-Chimborazo Elementary

"Members are pleasant, friendly, focused, visible and WORKING!!! THEY CARE about Bellevue and it shows!"

-Bellevue Elementary

"We thoroughly enjoyed the Global Youth Service Day Event. The members are still buzzing about the excitement that you guys brought to the club. We just want you to know how much we appreciate you."

-Boys and Girls Club of Richmond, Southside Unit



We at VCU AmeriCorps are multi-tasking, literacy-loving octopi!

Serving through Challenges

*Tassy Mason Team Leader
at Woodville Elementary School*

In life and in service, we are often faced with challenges. Since this is my second year with AmeriCorps I am no stranger to persevering through adversity. With everything that life has thrown at me throughout my two years serving, I have always had a strong support system with my fellow AmeriCorps team members and leaders. I am happy to have the team I had for the 2010-2011 year because they reassured me and kept me calm and focused on the work I had at hand with the children at Woodville. At one point in my service year, my truck literally blew up and I had no way of getting to my site. Fortunately for me, I had my members to build me up when I was down. My gracious member at the time, Holly Hankley, drove from Richmond to pick me up in Petersburg to take me to work in Richmond.

This service year I am finding the motivation to continue to serve through challenges. The students I serve give me such joy! The members I have worked with this year are as understanding and compassionate as the last. I suppose what I am getting at is that when you are serving, life may present obstacles but there is ALWAYS a light in the middle of darkness, and for me, the challenges I faced never measure up to the good I was doing in other's life. This is why I serve through challenges because in the end I am minimalizing my stress with the joy I get from giving back through trials and tribulations.

What AmeriCorps Means to Me

*Callie Newton, Team Leader at
George Mason Elementary School*

My role within AmeriCorps has taught me a lot about how to become a successful leader. I have learned how to appreciate diverse team members and students for their cultural differences. I have learned how to become an active member in the community, helping those we serve reach their goals. Most importantly, I have learned how to take action for change as well as advocate on behalf of my members and students in order to GET THINGS DONE! At the beginning of my service year, I promised to adhere to the values in our pledge and I am committed to carrying these values with me wherever my career path takes me once this year is complete.

AmeriCorps Pledge:

I will get things done for America to make our people safer, smarter, and healthier.

I will bring Americans together to strengthen our communities.

*Faced with apathy, I will take action.
Faced with conflict, I will seek common ground.*

Faced with adversity, I will persevere. I will carry this commitment with me this year and beyond.

I am an AmeriCorps member, and I will get things done.



A (Literal) Literary Feast at Francis Elementary

*By Christine Stoddard
Carver Elementary*

Enjoying the perfect word is much like enjoying the perfect flavor--so why not blend the two for a singular experience?

In its annual Book Tasting, Francis Elementary toys with the meaning of brain food. For the third year in a row, the school's AmeriCorps team has paired a different food with each of the event's featured books, allowing stories and flavors to come alive for voracious readers of all grade levels. The event serves as Team Francis' Legacy Project, something each VCU AmeriCorps team coordinates to benefit its school for the long-term.

This combined literacy and culinary event not only encourages children to try new books and new food. It also encourages children to read-aloud, improve their fluency, and celebrate literacy with the whole school, grades pre-K through 5.

This year's Book Tasting happened on June 11th, and presented a menu of 14 books and 14 accompanying foods. Taking place in the Media Center and adjacent courtyard, the event allowed children to explore 7 indoor tables and 7 outdoor tables. Children received a ticket for each book they read. Each ticket allowed the children to sample the book's food pairing. Children also had the chance to take books home.

This year, Team Francis began planning the Book Tasting in January. Fundraisers included an April poetry reading and book fair at Barnes & Noble, as well as a Spirit Night at Chick-fil-A. Other community partners included St. Francis Medical Center, Capital One, Martin's, and Costco. This year's Team Francis was made up of Sabrina Leblanc (Team Leader), Bill Craig, Deeyna Velasquez, and Magaly Maltez.

"I just hope that [the Book Tasting] will be so well in place by next year that...students will be excited and curious about it all year," said Sabrina, "The children deserve something special after working so hard all year."

Let's see what flurry of fiction and flavor year four of the Book Tasting shall bring.



On **Martin Luther King, Jr. Service Day**, our Corps served **over 170** homeless Richmonders a home-style meal at **Second Presbyterian Church!**



Throughout the year, our Corps hosted **Adopt-a-Street clean-ups** on Bowling Green Road.



Field Coordinator **Cheryl Jennings** was one of VCU's 2012 **PACME** honorees recognized for increasing diversity on campus

National Global Youth Service Day

Jason McDonald, Team Leader

Boys & Girls Club

On April 20th, 2012, to celebrate National Global Youth Service Day and National Boys & Girls Club week, our Corps partnered with the Southside Boys & Girls Club and Executive Women's International to host "A Passport to the World." We explored six of the world's continents with Boys & Girls Club members, drawing upon our own cultures and educational experiences to provide children with food, games, music, and activities representative of the entire globe. Children learned African dance moves, British folklore, and Spanish vocabulary--among many other things--in a single day, simply from moving from room to room. This event not only exposed the children to new cultures; it also gave children the chance to serve. Any club member who wanted could create July 4th cards to send to military servicemen and women through AMillionThanks.org's letter writing campaign. When asked what his favorite room of the day was, Shaking, age 12, said, "The Africa room was my favorite because I learned a lot of cool things about Africa that our teachers do not teach in school. "Throughout the entire event, attendees remained engaged and highly captivated. Even the staff at the Boys & Girls Club remarked on how excited club members appeared. They also could tell by looking at all of the AmeriCorps members' faces that we were enjoying ourselves, as well. The attitude of the event was contagious. VIPs and EWI members in attendance took notice and I sure felt the same. "A Passport to the World" was a great opportunity to see everyone from our AmeriCorps program in action, working together, to serve over 85 children at the Southside Boys & Girls Club. I can only hope everyone enjoyed themselves as much as I did and that next year will be as successful. What a great way to end the month!



Team Leader Tan Carter with some kids on GYSD making bracelets

About Our Program

Established in 1995, the Virginia Commonwealth University AmeriCorps Program has an educational focus with the goal of helping improve the literacy skills of local children and families. Reading by third grade has been identified by the Richmond community as a critical preventive strategy in addressing the health and safety needs of children in the metro area. VCU AmeriCorps members address this need by providing comprehensive reading support to elementary school students who are struggling academically. Members also enhance family literacy skills and parent involvement at partner schools by lending support to existing services as well as developing new programs to meet specific need.

Do you **enjoy** working with **children**? Want to **make a difference**? Need **money for college**? Want to **gain more experience**? Join AmeriCorps. **Benefits include:**

- Bi-weekly **living allowance**
- **Education award** upon completion
- Student **loan forbearance**
- **Lifelong friendships!**

