

RALLY Jacksonville – Mayor’s Literacy Initiative

Investing in literacy, an effective crime prevention strategy

by Shirley Shaw

Mayor John Peyton emerged from his office and came toward me, extending his hand in greeting. As we exchanged pleasantries, he said he and his wife had just returned from visiting her family on the West coast. Walking toward his office, I commented on the striking painting which covered a large portion of the wall. Becky, his administrative assistant, had already confirmed my guess that the small boy pictured in the arms of a man walking out on a pier was, indeed, our mayor as a child.

“That’s a picture of my father holding me when I was three years old. My grandmother painted it,” he said. “This is a copy; my father has the original in his office.”

In the mayor’s spacious, sunlit, fourth-floor office overlooking Hemming Plaza, we seated ourselves in front of his desk and Peyton came straight to the point. “We’re talking about literacy, right?”

When asked how that topic became his focus, he replied that while running for mayor it became apparent to him the number one concern in the minds of Jacksonville’s citizens was education. So what could a mayor do about education?

“In our form of government the mayor doesn’t have jurisdictional influence over the school board and historically city government has never taken ownership in education. But to me it seems appropriate that everyone has to take a role,

including businesses, the non-profit community, the school board in partnership with city hall.”

He talked with a lot of people during this time, including Adam Herbert, former UNF president and Education Commissioner for the state of Florida under Jeb Bush. Herbert told him that research indicates **early literacy makes all the difference in the world** – preparing students for the school system gives them a much better chance of succeeding in the system.

“We know there are students going through the school system who have trouble reading. We know that 47 percent of our community is functionally illiterate (has trouble filling out a job application without assistance); nationwide it’s 54 percent. That’s a staggering number and it’s unacceptable.

“If we are to achieve greatness in Jacksonville, improve economic access, raise per capita income, help more people experience prosperity, break the poverty cycle, decrease the crime rate – the answer is literacy. We have to have a workforce that can learn, re-learn, think critically and creatively and contribute to the workplace. And the most important foundation to those skills is being able to read.”

The mayor assembled a “great group of folks, a lot of stakeholders, without whom we would not be successful: FCCJ, UNF (Early Learning Literacy Model – ELM), Head Start, Urban League, the library

system, United Way, Ready Child Coalition (a state program for child readiness). All these folks are players, stakeholders sitting for the first time together to figure out how we can be successful.”

RALLY Jacksonville!

The result of this year-long study was RALLY Jacksonville, otherwise known as the Mayor’s Literacy Initiative.

Its goal – to make reading a core value of Jacksonville and to have all third graders reading at grade level.

Its target – four-year-olds.

The way to do it – convert daycare providers from custodial care to learning care.

There are 11,000 four-year-olds in Duval County; 8,000 are now members of Mayor Peyton’s Book Club. When a child signs up, each one receives a colorful backpack filled with such items as a Rally Jax T-shirt, a book*, crayons, a child’s blanket, a puppet and cup. Children are reached through daycare facilities and periodic events at various branch libraries.

“Partnership Early

Education Resource (PEER) teams of literacy experts (we now have 76 professionals) travel to daycare centers to help institute learning practices, and the centers will be rated so parents will know which ones have learning tools and which don’t. Right now,” Peyton noted, “the only requirement by the state is [for a daycare center] to provide a safe place. We want it to be safe and learning friendly where the kids start getting reading skills.

“We’re in uncharted waters, but Gov. Bush says we are leading the state in our efforts. We have to measure what we are doing to make sure it’s working. One of the state’s foremost authorities on early learning, Cheryl Fontaine (UNF), is handling the measurement component and it’s expensive, but, in my mind, it’s too important not to try something; shame on us for not experimenting.”

Prison illiteracy rate high

The mayor then addressed another facet of literacy, or lack

thereof, which affects many Jacksonville citizens every day.

“In the juvenile detention center the illiteracy rate is about 85 percent; in prisons it’s about 70 percent. We know literacy is the foremost indicator of how far students will go in school, what kind of job they will get and whether they will be able to mesh with society and function fully.”

According to a report from the U.S. Education Department’s National Center for Education Statistics, *Literacy Behind Prison Walls*, two-thirds of America’s prisoners have lower literacy rates than the general population. **About a quarter of the general population lacks a high school diploma; about half of prisoners have failed to complete school.**

Stated another way, Burt Galaway (*Literacy and Justice*, John Howard Society, 1997) says, “Offenders experience literacy problems at a rate three times that of the general population. They are also four times as likely to have learning disabilities. The average

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