

Bush, Goossen: If you can read this, please help



Cody Duty, Staff

Steven Brown carries a stack of books to be boxed at the Books Between Kids warehouse as 40 volunteers sorted through 7,000 books, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2013, in Houston. Neil and Barbara Bush presented Books Between Kids, the Houston non-profit that gives books to disadvantaged students, with the Daily Point of Light Award. Last year, the start-up organization collected and distributed more than 100,000 books to kids enrolled at 22 Houston schools. The Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation also extended Books Between Kids a grant to match donations up to \$9,000, to support the annual lease of the warehouse where the books are stored before distribution. (Cody Duty / Houston Chronicle)

The numbers around literacy in Houston are stark. Today, one out of five adults is functionally illiterate. Nearly half of Houston's children enter kindergarten ill-prepared for school and already have an uphill battle to catch up with their peers. For children who aren't reading on grade-level by the end of third grade, there is only a 1-in-8 chance they will ever catch up.

Today, 80 percent - that's nearly 170,000 - of students in Houston Independent School District

qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Their families are struggling to pay for basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Books simply don't make the shopping list - when studies show that having books in the home correlates powerfully with school success.

We need to act to turn these numbers around.

Just one year ago, Amy Barnes and Sandra Ahlhorn set out to do just that. They founded Books Between Kids, with a goal to collect enough books to give six books to every child in six Houston schools. That seemed like a pretty ambitious goal. They had to rethink their plan when Better World Books donated an 18-wheeler filled with 70,000 books. And families donated another 30,000 books through book drives in schools, Boy Scout troops and neighborhoods. Last May, with help from many volunteers, Books Between Kids gave six books to every child in 22 Houston schools. Over 12,000 kids started their summer vacation off right - with an armload of books to take home, enjoy and build their own home library!



On Nov. 12, the hard work of these Houston volunteers was in the spotlight. Books Between Kids received the Daily Point of Light Award, which recognizes ordinary Americans who create extraordinary change in their communities. And the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, which is working to develop a blueprint for community action that will raise literacy rates in Houston, has issued a matching grant to support and advance the great work of Books Between Kids.

This recognition came on the Houston stop of the One America tour, a year-long national campaign from Points of Light and JPMorgan Chase that brings together prominent voices to inspire and mobilize 1 million people in acts of service. One America's goals include reaching 500,000 children with needed resources (books, school supplies, tutors, coaches and clothing) and support that will help them achieve success in life and in school. Impact of this magnitude originates from an individual taking action, just as Amy Barnes and Sandra Ahlhorn have. So what can you do?

You can mentor a person learning to read, organize a book drive, or contribute to Points of Light or the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation. Volunteer Houston offers a wide range of volunteer opportunities. If you're a leader of an organization or a company, you can adopt a school, provide volunteers to teach ESL classes, or match your employees' contributions to literacy organizations.

Young people who have low literacy skills have little hope of obtaining decent paying jobs. Functionally illiterate adults can't read a prescription, follow emergency weather alerts or help a child with homework. Furthermore, illiteracy leads to higher dropout rates, unemployment rates and incarceration rates. Every one of these outcomes has a high price for taxpayers, and the social and economic prosperity for future generations.

We believe that by bringing all of the resources in this great community to bear, Houston can become a 100 percent literate community. That's a number around literacy that we can all embrace.

Bush is chairman of Points of Light, the world's largest organization dedicated to volunteer service, and co-founder of the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation. Goossen is president of JPMorgan Chase Houston Region.