

**OUR MISSION:** Read to Grow promotes language skills and literacy for children, beginning at birth, and supports parents as their babies' first teachers.

# The Truth About Dragons

*A Message from Read to Grow Executive Director  
Suzannah Holsenbeck*

Way past bedtime on a Wednesday night and it was not my best moment. Exhausted and frustrated, an endless to do list playing through my head, I yelled to my 4 year old, Alexander, in no uncertain terms that he needed to stop playing and go brush his teeth. He, in turn, ran crying into his bedroom and hid under the covers. Samuel, my 2 year old, shouted from the bathroom that he was "listening and Alex isn't!" which of course made his brother wail louder.

If we are responsible for young children, we have all been in this moment, and with or without children, we've all been in some combination of this moment since March 2020. Daily stressors existed before the pandemic, and since March those stressors have been heightened for most of us. Some of us have lost love ones, some of us have lost jobs, some of us are trying to work while our

children are home trying to learn, some of us are particularly affected by the racial unrest and some of us are just waking up to it. We're in the same ocean but in many different boats.

I picked up a book and sat down on the edge of the bed and began to read. "The stories about dragons are true," the story "The Truth About Dragons" by Jamie Zollars begins. The wails turned to quieter sobs. "Dragons tower and hover and smother." A little head peeked through the blanket and a little person crawled out and perched on the bed next to me. "But the truth about dragons is that their socks don't always match." Soon Alexander was curled up against me, following the story, making exclamations like, "Hey Mama! That dragon isn't a dragon! It's a PERSON!" By the time we had finished the book, both children were in my lap, giggling about the dragon tails curling around the inside cover.

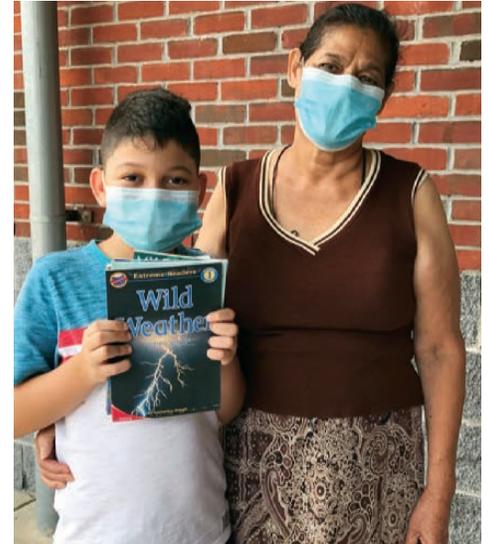


Photo: L. Sylvester

Guadalupe and her grandson, Farez. Read more about their story on page 3.

I don't actually remember if Alexander brushed his teeth that night. What I do remember is that he went to bed happy, feeling safe in his home and his relationships with his mother and his brother. That moment could have ended with more tears,

*(continued on page 2)*

## Read to Grow Welcomes New Board Members

The Read to Grow Board of Directors proudly welcomes three new board members to the Read to Grow family.



Dr. Monette Ferguson, Ed.D.

Dr. Monette Ferguson, Ed.D., executive director of Alliance for Community Empowerment, began her three-year term in July. "Dr. Ferguson's broad and deep experience serving families in Bridgeport and the greater Bridgeport area is invaluable to our community," says Board Chair Jeff Hartmann. Dr. Ferguson began her non-profit leadership as a Head Start Family caseworker, quickly rising through the ranks to lead Alliance (formerly ABCD) and connect the most vulnerable to valuable resources. Dr. Ferguson serves on the Governor's Workforce Council and is co-chair of the Bridgeport Area Non-Profit Collaborative.



Dr. Sherene Mason, MD, MBA

Dr. Sherene Mason, MD, MBA, pediatric nephrologist at Connecticut Children's, began her three-year term in July. Dr. Mason is part of the medical team running Connecticut's first and only pediatric dialysis center located at Connecticut Children's in Hartford. She was awarded the American Society of Pediatric Nephrology Fellow's Research Award during a fellowship at Yale and fondly remembers learning about Read to Grow when she completed her pediatric residency and a year as chief resident at Yale New Haven Hospital. "Dr. Mason brings to Read to Grow a commitment to ensuring all children have access to the best care available paired with her first-hand knowledge of the importance of delivering a literacy message early and often," says Governance Committee Chair Jennifer Fusco, JD.



Jane Lee, MBA

Jane Lee, MBA, joined the Read to Grow Board this October. Ms. Lee first learned about Read to Grow when a volunteer brought her a book for her newborn daughter at Yale New Haven Hospital 18 years ago. Ms. Lee served as the senior director of budget and planning for Yale University for many years, leading a \$3.5 billion operating and \$0.5 billion capital budget for the University. Ms. Lee recently left Yale to pursue her master's in social work at the University of Connecticut and is currently serving as an economic coach for childcare providers through All Our Kin. "Jane's background of formidable financial management and her compassion and commitment to supporting children and families makes her a perfect match for Read to Grow," says Board Secretary Carla Horwitz.

# Volunteer Spotlights

In recent months, Read to Grow volunteers have shown undeniable flexibility and commitment to Read to Grow's literacy mission. We would like to take this opportunity to shine some light on two particular individuals.

Photo: M. Alpert



Volunteer Patti Maciag at Truman School in New Haven.

Read to Grow volunteer Patti Maciag made every Friday fantastic through Read to Grow's spring and summer New Haven Book Distribution. Every week, Patti showed up with a big smile (under her mask which coordinated with her outfit, of course) and great enthusiasm as many families arrived throughout the morning to pick up food and beautiful new books on the sidewalk in front of Truman School. Families were greeted with Patti's joyful endorsements about the newest titles that arrived each week.

However, book distribution was not Patti's first volunteer effort for Read to Grow. Patti learned about the Books for Babies program through her work as a Hartford Hospital

Auxiliary member. Two years ago, Patti became a Books for Babies volunteer on Bliss 6 Maternity at Hartford Hospital and loved meeting with mothers of newborns and their families to talk about the importance of reading to their baby from birth. Patti became one of our 'go to' veteran volunteers and helped provide modeling for our literacy message and guidance to our newest volunteers. Her warmth and deep passion for Read to Grow's message gave our newcomers confidence to convey the powerful message that parents are their child's first teacher.

When the pandemic suspended hospital volunteer activity Patti did not hesitate to volunteer for the New Haven Book Distribution project. Ever a collaborator at heart and possessing boundless energy, Patti also collected books at her home through the summer from very generous Hartford Hospital Auxiliary members. These books were donated to Read to Grow's Books for Kids program. Since 2019, Patti has collected a total of 3,440 books for Read to Grow.

Every week this spring and summer, you could find Read to Grow volunteer Jack Mulqueen distributing books on Fridays at Clinton Avenue School with Cheresse Chambers, Read to Grow's Early Steps to School Success Coordinator. When the pandemic required Read to Grow to suspend office volunteers, Jack immediately raised his



Photo: Read to Grow

Volunteer Jack and ESSS coordinator Cheresse distributing books.

hand to help with book distribution at school meal sites. Ever the efficient organizer, Jack brought his own hand truck to roll boxes of books each week. Together, Jack and Cheresse distributed close to 1,000 books to children and families.

Before the pandemic, Jack had volunteered at Read to Grow's Branford office for over three years. A retired attorney, Jack brings his myriad talents of organization and observation to benefit Read to Grow. Jack works three to four days a week entering reply card and survey information into the Read to Grow database as well recording inventory for book requests and book donations. Jack is always willing to do more and learn more.

We are beyond grateful for the good will and dedication of all of our volunteers. Stay tuned for more bragging.

*Books for Babies Coordinator Marguerite Alpert*

## THE TRUTH ABOUT DRAGONS

*(continued from page 1)*

more wails, more anger, but the sharing of the book quite literally turned it around for everyone. We speak so much about the benefit of reading for children, we often forget that there are benefits for parents too. Sharing that book with my young sons helped me to regulate my own emotions. I had to breathe, I got some of my frustration out when I voiced the dragons and the children, and I was able to giggle with my children when they noticed the funny parts.

For 20 years, Read to Grow's mission has been to promote language skills and literacy for children, beginning at birth, and to support parents as their children's first teachers. That second part of our mission has come into heightened focus this year, from the conversations our coordinators have

with parents during virtual workshops to the literacy materials we include in every packet given to the 22,000 babies born in 15 hospitals around the state. When we give books to children and our literacy message to parents, we are betting on the fact that when parents and young children have access to books they are more likely to develop a family reading routine!

As of this fall, Read to Grow has given 2.2 million books over the past 20 years and since March we have given out over 61,000 books at school meal sites and food pantries around the state. Read to Grow will continue to be here to give out books to children and to support parents because we know that despite the instability of the world, books are a mechanism for a healthy, happy life.

### NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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53 School Ground Road, Branford, CT 06405  
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<sup>1</sup>Thaler, R., Sunstein, C., *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (Penguin Books, 2008).

# Read to Grow Distributes 61,000 Books and Counting in Response to COVID-19

## UPDATES FROM OUR STATEWIDE EFFORT GIVING OUT BOOKS AT SCHOOL MEAL SITES

Read to Grow has seen firsthand that people recognize the importance of providing free children's books to families. With support from Senator Murphy and RJ Julia Booksellers, thousands of dollars were raised to provide free books to children receiving grab and go meals at their schools between May and August. In addition, grants totaling \$45,000 from the COVID-19 Community Fund (sponsored by CFGNH and the United Way), the Yale Community for New Haven Fund, and the Scripps Family Fund for Education and the Arts funded new books for children in New Haven and Windham Counties. The combined generosity of individuals and foundations translated into an extraordinary 61,000 new books for children of all ages in Bridgeport, Middletown, New Haven, Norwalk, Waterbury and Windham County.

*Read to Grow Grants Manager Paula Grimm*



*A family in Bridgeport choosing books together.*

Photo: Read to Grow

## FAMILIES CHOOSE BOOKS TOGETHER

Each Friday during the summer, hundreds of schools around the state were visited by readers. Many of the same families showed up weekly to receive meals and books.

Mariana and Lina are the mothers of two such families. The sisters-in-law came with their collective 4 children, who are 2, 6, 6 and 8. The cousins, who all attend Barack H. Obama University Magnet School, would run to the table to see what new books they could choose to take home for their growing libraries. Their excitement was evident as they helped each other choose new books!

Guadalupe, and her grandson, Farez, also visited each week. From the books provided, Farez chose stories in English for himself and bilingual Spanish/English books that he thought his grandma would enjoy. He did this because he reads books in Spanish to his grandmother each day. Together, they share a love of books and learning in two languages.

*Books for Kids Coordinator Linda Sylvester*

## FAMILIAS DE EARLY STEPS PRESENTES EN LA DISTRIBUCIÓN DE LIBROS DE VERANO DE LA ESCUELA COLUMBUS EN NEW HAVEN

Felices de recibir cada semana a nuestras familias del área, al igual que las familias de Early Steps en la distribución de libros y comidas de la escuela Columbus en New Haven. Cada semana recibimos un número considerable de familias que pudieron beneficiarse con esta increíble causa y crear su propia librería en casa en tiempos de pandemia. Read to Grow distribuyó un total de 721 libros durante el verano en la escuela Columbus. Qué mejor que recibir una sonrisa a pesar de la mascarilla, pero la alegría y el agradecimiento de las familias es impagable. Diana Zhicay y su hija de 2 años Alba Calle

son parte del programa Early Steps desde el 2019, una vez por semana decidieron ir a la escuela Columbus a la distribución, acumulando un total de 18 libros y creando para Alba su propia librería en casa. Diana nos cuenta que los libros favoritos de Alba son: La Caperucita Roja, El Patito Feo y Baja Gatito. Esperamos seguir siendo parte de esta hermosa obra cada verano y porqué no en otras estaciones del año también. Seguir apoyando a nuestros pequeños lectores y verlos crecer es nuestra misión. Gracias a todos los que hicieron posible esta primera distribución de libros en verano, en conjunto con las escuelas públicas de New Haven y la distribución de alimentos para familias.

*Early Steps to School Success Coordinator Viviana Nunez*



*A preschooler in Norwalk chooses books in Spanish to read with her parents.*

Photo: Norwalk Headstart



*A New Haven family reads books together.*

Photo: L. Sylvester

## EMILY BUILDS HER HOME LIBRARY

Emily Alvarez is a fourth grade student at Clinton Avenue School in New Haven. This summer she collected 14 books from Read to Grow! Emily would cross the street every week to get her free book. Her favorite book so far is a story about Misty Copeland, the first Black ballerina to make principal with the American Ballet Theater. Emily said, "it is my favorite book because I like ballet and I want to be a ballerina someday too."

*Books for Kids Coordinator Evelyn Tomasello*

## BOOKS TO WINDHAM COUNTY

The literacy committee of Altrusa International of Northeastern Connecticut decided to mirror projects in New Haven and Bridgeport and partner with Read to Grow to provide books for the children in Windham. Over four thousand books were distributed. The books were sorted and distributed by club members to low income families at seven free meal sites in Windham. During the month of June, eighteen distributions were completed. In addition, 176 bags of books were distributed at the Food Share site in Storrs in July. *Altrusa International member and former school principal, Anne Rash*

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## Community Partner Updates

### PURPOSEFUL PARTNERSHIPS: UCONN HEALTH PARENTING AND READ TO GROW

For over a decade, UConn Health Parenting, funded by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, has cultivated support networks by providing group psychoeducation and support for families of infants and young children. Parents gain confidence in their abilities by being together with other parents; they feel more supported and they build parenting skills.

Prenatal Parenting is a 6-session course providing prenatal education focused on attachment, child development and parent mental health. The course includes the Read to Grow Prenatal Parenting module which provides expectant parents with education about early literacy, parent-child interaction and screen time parameters and distributes new baby board books.

It's challenging to meet a new baby for the first time on camera because it's much harder to convey the range of emotions you feel for the infant and the parent during



Photo: J. Vendetti

*Masks and books from Read to Grow for parents enrolled in the UConn Healthy Parenting Program.*

this major life transition. This summer we safely gathered with moms and their babies and toddlers at Stanley Quarter Park in New Britain to walk the trail around the pond. Read to Grow provided a new book for all fifteen families and we gave each mother a

beautiful cotton mask! Perfect gifts during a pandemic! UConn Health Parenting is truly grateful for an extraordinary organization that values groupwork practice and supports our parenting education work.

*Jennifer Vendetti, LMSW, CEIM, PMH-C  
For more information visit <https://health.uconn.edu/parenting-program/>*

### FUNDER SPOTLIGHT

For a dozen years the Ensworth Charitable Foundation has been a steady partner investing in Read to Grow's literacy programs in Hartford County. Their support can be seen in the literacy bundles given to pregnant women receiving care at Charter Oak Health, in the literacy packets given to parents of newborns at Saint Francis and Hartford hospitals, and in the free books that children choose when they visit Book Places in Hartford. We are grateful for their commitment to promote early childhood literacy.