

# Side by Side

*A message from Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck*

It has been the honor of my life to be both a parent and the leader for the past 5 years of this storied 25-year-old organization. In my daily advocacy for early literacy, I often think back to the morning I was visited for the first time by a Read to Grow volunteer in the hospital. I was a brand new mother to a little one, experiencing all of the joy and terror of brand new motherhood, beside myself with worry and guilt as my son struggled to latch and I struggled to feed him. A soft knock on the door interrupted a self-pity fest and an older woman entered and gently said, “did you see that there’s a book here for you to read to your baby?” I had in fact not realized there was a book there in the hospital room and as an avid reader and former English teacher, her question caught my attention.

This kind volunteer went on to show me Read to Grow’s book, *Welcome to the World!*

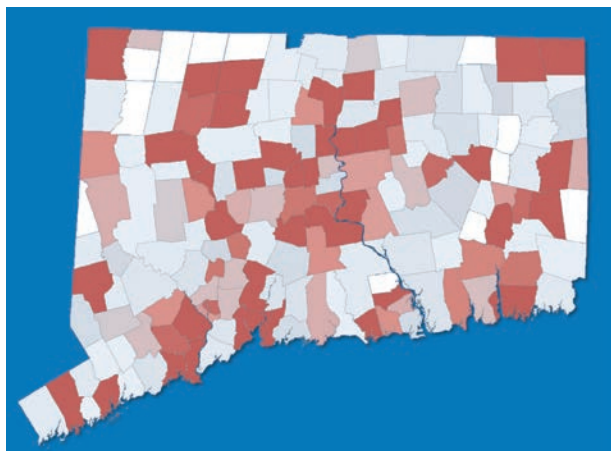
and encouraged me to read to my baby right there in the hospital room. She showed me an image of what a newborn’s neural circuitry looks like alongside an image of what a 3-year-old’s brain looks like. Those images have stayed with me ever since; the tremendous amount of brain development that happens in those first 1000 days is astounding. I already knew it was important to read to my child, but I didn’t realize that holding a baby and reading to them can literally impact the amount of white matter—myelinated axons that act as pathways for communication between different brain regions, aka the good stuff—our brains develop.

A few days later, we left the hospital only to return less than 24 hours later to the PICU when my son had to be admitted for a severe case of bilirubin. In between the nurses checks and his treatments, I was allowed to hold

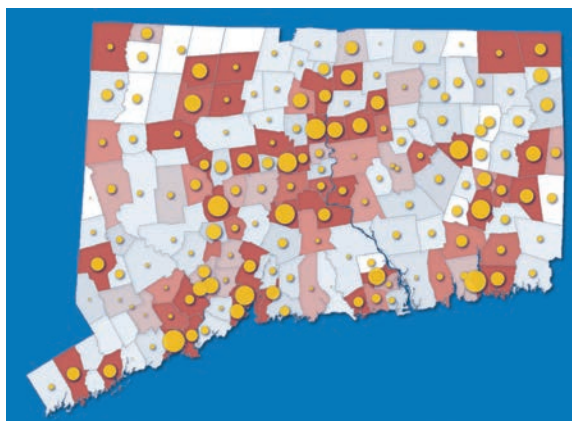
and cuddle him occasionally. It was during that time that I truly started reading to him, delighting in his coos and grunts and soothed by the time spent focused on soothing him.

Here we are, the little baby is now nearly nine and his reading journey has appeared in bits and pieces in these newsletter reflections, including the very first newsletter of my tenure, published a month after the world shut down due to COVID. How lucky am I to have had a front row seat to the process of learning to read while simultaneously working alongside so many committed employees, community members, volunteers and donors, laser-focused on supporting families with their child’s literacy journey. Please join me in saying happy birthday, Read to Grow! May your next 25 years be as grounded and hopeful as the first quarter century of growth!

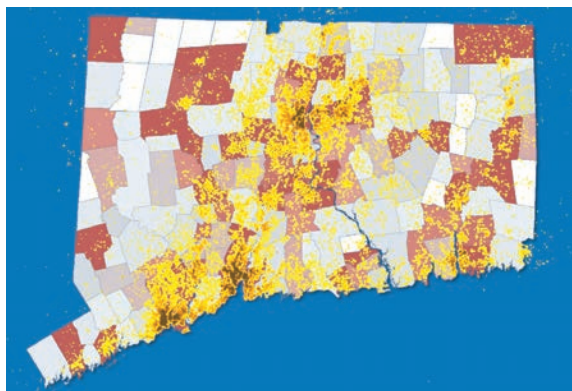
*We are excited to give you a preview of an ambitious data mapping project Read to Grow has undertaken with the GIS mapping consulting group North Arrow. We look forward to sharing more in the coming months.*



*This map represents all of the school districts in Connecticut. The darker the red, the higher the percentage of children entering kindergarten without adequate literacy skills.*



*This map represents various levels of poverty across Connecticut, with the larger yellow circles indicating a higher percentage of families living below the federal poverty level.*



*This heat map represents Read to Grow's reach across Connecticut and where we have focused our efforts to date.*

# Reflecting on 25 Years of Impact

## A Message from the Founder of RTG

As I reflect on the incredible journey that Read to Grow (RTG) has taken over the past 25 years, I am filled with gratitude and awe at how far we have come. What began as a small but passionate effort to support the language development and literacy of children, has blossomed into one of the most effective and professional literacy organizations in Connecticut. It has been a journey of growth, dedication, and most importantly, a deep commitment to the families and children we serve.

When we started in 2000 with just a single hospital partnership (thank you Yale!), we could not have imagined that RTG would come to partner with 19 hospitals across the state. Along the way, we've donated nearly 3-million books to children and families, creating a ripple effect of learning, growth, and empowerment. What began as a simple mission—to help parents become their baby's first teachers—has now evolved into a thriving organization with a remarkable team of individuals who share in this vision.

We started from good intentions, with an important mission and an innocent, naive energy, and have arrived at this incredibly professional organization, of which I am immensely proud. I remember the early days when our part-time executive director, Gini Mariotti, worked in an office all by herself, supported by nine dedicated board members. As a group, we were delusionally optimistic, but we simply put one foot in front of the other. The original, intrepid board and scrappy, creative staff, including Robin Baker and Priscilla Russo, built the foundation from which everything followed.

Now, 25 years later, RTG has grown to include 14 board members, 14 staff members, and more than 40 volunteers who have contributed more than 3,387 hours of their time and energy. Together, we have created a network of support for families that extends beyond the hospital walls, empowering parents to embrace their roles as their children's first teachers with confidence and enthusiasm.



None of this would have been possible without the unwavering leadership of Suzannah Holsenbeck, our incomparable executive director, who has steered RTG to heights we never imagined possible. Her vision, tireless work ethic, and ability to inspire and motivate others have been a driving force behind RTG's success. Under her guidance, we have exceeded expectations, and I am continually amazed by her ability to bring out the best in everyone involved with the organization.

If I think about the millions of books that have gone out to parents and children, I retain the same optimism and hope that I had 25 years ago—that books truly enhance and change lives. The joy of seeing a child's face light up when they receive their very first book, or the pride in a parent's eyes when they realize the powerful role they play in shaping their child's future, is indescribable. This is what makes all of the hard work worthwhile—the knowledge that we are making a real difference in the lives of the next generation.

I am excited to see how RTG will continue to evolve. Our work is far from done. There are still countless children and families in need of support, and I have no doubt that RTG will continue to be a beacon of hope and possibility for them.

Thank you to everyone—our partners, donors, volunteers, board members, staff, and especially the families we serve—for making the past 25 years a journey worth celebrating. The future is bright, and with all of you by our side, I know that the next 25 years will be even more impactful than the first.

With deep gratitude and excitement for what's to come,

Roxanne Coady  
Founder, Read To Grow

### Mom gave her only child a gift that has lasted a lifetime — a love of books

With Mother's Day this Sunday, many of us are considering how best to express our appreciation and love.

While I am unable to do this because my mother is no longer with me in the physical sense, her presence and the gift she gave me, a love of books, was brought very much to mind when I recently attended the 25th anniversary celebration of the founding of the R.J. Julia Bookstore in Madison.

One of my happiest memories, frozen in time by my uncle's camera, is of sitting on my aunt's porch in Michigan, my dog Toby beside me while I listened as my mother read to me. The delight of wonderful stories shared together is an experience I shall always treasure. As an only child, I learned to be self-reliant and also learned that books not only opened up new worlds; they were readily



CONTRIBUTED  
Roxanne Coady, owner of R.J. Julia Bookstore in Madison

available and constant friends. Roxanne Coady opened her independent bookstore in what was formerly Nick's Bar and Grill. Her mission, about which

she is still so passionate, brings tears to her eyes when she repeats, "This is a place where words matter and where writer meets reader in a welcoming atmosphere, presenting an opportunity for discovery."

Despite the demise of many independent booksellers, R.J. Julia's has not just persevered but flourished and hosted distinguished authors from Frank McCourt and David McCullough to Julie Andrews and Hillary Clinton.

When was the last time you read a book? Is your daily reading tweets, Facebook or the cooking instructions on a frozen food container?

Sadly, the number of nonbook readers has nearly tripled since 1978. According to the Pew Research Center, nearly one-quarter of American adults had not read a single book in the past year; that means they hadn't

cracked a paperback, fired up a Kindle or even hit play on an audio book in the car. And yet, we know that reading keeps you mentally stimulated, exercises your brain, adds to your knowledge and vocabulary, reduces stress and is helpful in every profession.

Some additional reasons to read are:

- Exposure to new information and finding new ways to solve problems.
- Become a better you through understanding the world and others.
- Additional knowledge. The A-Z of anything from cooking to playing chess.
- Boosting imagination and creativity.
- Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body. In addition to a delightful café and bistro, part of the bookstore offers tasteful and

unique gift items as well as unusual cards.

Roxanne is also the founder of an important nonprofit, Read to Grow, which promotes language building and literacy for children beginning at birth, and supports parents as babies' first teachers. We need to support local businesses that contribute to our well-being and make our Connecticut towns such unique and delightful places to live.

At the same time, let us remember to contribute to our local libraries that afford us access to the extensive world of books.

Contact Jean Cherni, certified senior adviser for Senior Living Solutions and Peace Plus, a helpful, full-service program for seniors contemplating a move, at [jeancherni@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jeancherni@sbcglobal.net) or 49 Rose St., Apt. 510, Branford, 06405.

## READ TO GROW MILESTONES

### 1999

Roxanne Coady and Dr. Laurel Shader have a conversation about giving books to children and join forces to host the first "Stuff A Bus" Book Drive in Fair Haven.



### 2001

Roxanne Coady rallies a group of committed women to hand out copies of Goodnight Moon on the Maternity Floor at Yale New Haven Hospital, initiating what would become Books for Babies. Read to Grow, Inc. is incorporated, forms a board and receives non-profit status from the IRS.



# Building Brains, Building Community

## A Message from Read to Grow's original fiscal sponsor, the Community Foundation of Greater New Haven

For 25 years Read to Grow has inspired children and their parents to read more and has given them the resources to do so. The value of getting books into the hands of little ones while brain development is at its peak is immeasurable, and Read to Grow ensures that all growing children have books in their homes, regardless of socio-economic status. Since Read to Grow's inception, The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven has recognized this important work.

With the first Donor Advised Fund grants in 1999 and 2000, The Community Foundation and the community-at-large have demonstrated an understanding of the power and purpose of Read to Grow. The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven made its first unrestricted grant of \$20,000 in 2001. In total, more than

\$610,000 in grants have been made to support Books for Babies, Books for Kids, Book Places and the other resources that Read to Grow has provided to the community for the last 25 years.

Beyond the grant, the organization has shown its resilience and commitment to mission with a strong Board of Directors and talented Executive Directors. Its leadership has participated in 30 different training and work sessions with The Community Foundation. This attention to infrastructure and engagement with highly skilled professional staff and volunteer leadership has contributed to Read to Grow's organizational growth and community impact.

Studies show that low literacy hurts our children and our communities. Read to Grow's model helps parents realize that they are their

children's first teacher and gives them the board books, how-to guides and other resources to start their family literacy journey. Read to Grow has also developed a continuum of support for families with infants and young children, particularly those in low-income households, to provide a pathway to early childhood literacy. Innovative partnerships with community groups, libraries, hospitals, child-care centers, doctors and others allow Read to Grow to continue to reach children as they grow. The Community Foundation is proud to have supported Read to Grow's important work for 25 years and remains committed to the shared mission of opportunity and equity for everyone in our community.

—Jackie Downing, Senior Director of Grant Making and Nonprofit Support, CFGNH.

## Citizens Gives Back

As a proud board member of Read to Grow and president of Citizens, Connecticut, I'm honored to celebrate 25 years of impact alongside this incredible organization. At Citizens, our commitment to strengthening communities drives everything we do. By empowering our neighbors through financial literacy, supporting workforce development, and encouraging our colleagues to volunteer their time and talents, we strive to build a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Our partnership with Read to Grow is one we hold especially dear. Citizens awarded one of its first grants to the organization 25 years ago, and we've remained steadfast in our support ever since. From sponsoring author events and funding the distribution of 33,000 copies of *Hello Sometimes* during the pandemic to serving as the title sponsor of Popcorn & PJs for the past five years, we've worked together to spread the joy of reading to families across Connecticut.

We also recognize the power of early financial literacy. Each April during Financial Literacy Month, Citizens partners with Read to Grow to introduce young readers to numeracy

### Caring streak marks Citizens' Maass



Lisa Maass, newly seated as chief of Citizens Bank's Connecticut franchise, says her focus is on building its reputation as "a very good commercial bank," including ramping up staffing.

"We have a plan to succeed," Maass said in an interview last week. She said she shared her as its new Connecticut president. "We have a team that works well together."

Already with about 700 Connecticut employees spread among more than 45 branches and loan production offices statewide, Citizens has hired 25 workers so far this year, Maass said. The bank plans to add an unspecified number of new workers in the state later on, a Citizens spokesman said.

With them, Citizens will pursue expansion of its presence in the state's commercial, mortgage and commercial-banking markets, Maass said.

It will also maintain its active community engagement, a reflection of both the bank's and Maass' commitments to giving back. "She was a co-founder of 'Read to Grow,'" the financial nonprofit that in its 25 years has donated some 1.3 million hardcover books to individuals, school teachers, hospitals and other family-support organizations vying to boost literacy among the needy.

Citizens was a "Read to Grow" four sponsor and continues to financially support the literacy organization, said Executive Director Kim Tolson. Maass also sits on its board.

"She's very smart and she's someone who really can get to the heart of the matter and come up with solutions people beyond your immediate circle can see," Tolson said. "She knows how to motivate and support."

Maass says she's also embraced banking. As Citizens' Connecticut president, she will divide her offices between New Haven and downtown Hartford, at the 10th floor of State House Square, the office of U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal.

"Delivering solutions. Meeting with customers," she said. "I've been doing this years and I have customers who have

through storybooks and fun, hands-on learning tools — like last year's "Lemonade in Winter" given out alongside a green Citizens piggy bank to this year's "Octopuses Don't Have Bones" distributed with an accompanying calculator.

At Citizens, we believe investments in literacy and numeracy lead to stronger communities and brighter futures. It's a privilege to stand alongside Read to Grow as we continue making a meaningful difference together to help families take the first steps toward understanding financial concepts in a fun and accessible way.

Here's to the next 25 years of empowering families and building a love of learning that lasts a lifetime.

—Lisa Maass, RTG Board Member & President, Citizens, Connecticut

### NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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Citizens Bank  
Community Foundation for Greater New Haven  
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## 2002–2015

Read to Grow hosts annual high profile author luncheon fundraisers to raise awareness about early literacy and fundraise for critical early literacy programming; featured authors include Toni Morrison, President Jimmy Carter, Madeline Albright, Julie Andrews and many more.

## 2006–2014

Read to Grow facilitates the MotherRead program at York Correctional Facility.







## READ TO GROW MILESTONES

**2012**

Read to Grow publishes and begins distributing Nancy Wallace's *Welcome To The World!* to all newborns born in Read to Grow partner hospitals.

**2016**

Read to Grow launches the Prenatal Project through Books for Babies in partnership with community health care clinics in regions with partner hospitals.







## 2019-2024

Read to Grow partners with Save The Children to implement Early Steps to School Success in New Haven and Bridgeport, serving more than 400 families with home visits and literacy resources.

## 2020

Read to Grow partners with RJ Julia Booksellers and Senator Chris Murphy during COVID to provide high quality books to students picking up food at School Meal Distribution sites around Connecticut.



# 25th Anniversary Lifetime Achievement Award

## Nancy Elizabeth Wallace

Read to Grow's journey has been one of dedication and growth, driven by our mission to promote language skills and literacy for children starting at birth, while also empowering families to become their babies' first teachers. Since our founding 25 years ago, we have expanded our reach and evolved, always guided by that mission. The organization's success has been a collective effort of countless dedicated staff and volunteers. However, some individuals have made such groundbreaking contributions that their impact continues to shape the work we do today.

One such individual is Nancy Elizabeth Wallace, the author of *Welcome to the World!*, a board book that has become synonymous with Read to Grow. This beloved book is given to every child born in hospitals partnered with us across the state, introducing families to our organization and laying the foundation for early literacy. Its impact is immeasurable,

touching the lives of thousands of families and children, fostering language skills from day one.

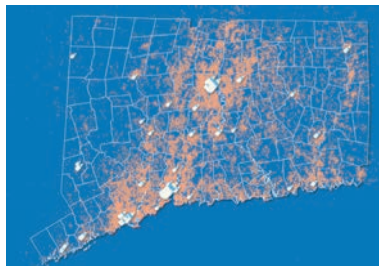
Read to Grow is thrilled to honor Nancy Wallace, children's book author and illustrator, with the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award. A long-time Connecticut resident, Wallace impacted hundreds of children through her role as a Child Life Specialist at Yale New Haven Hospital. An incredible 419,300 copies of three of Wallace's 28 published children's books have been the featured books Read to Grow has distributed to newborns and their families in hospitals across Connecticut. *Rabbit's Bedtime* (28,630 copies), *Baby Day!* (119,063 copies) and the current *Welcome to The World!* (271,345 copies) and their Spanish-English versions have been the first book more than 400,000 newborns and their families have read together. Nancy recently retired from creating children's books and the entire archive of her

process, from thumbnail to finished art and manuscripts, including the correspondence of collaboration with her editors, art directors and art designers now resides in the Northeast Children's Literature Collection at the University of Connecticut where she received her B.A. and M.A.



## Program Reflections

*We are thrilled to bring you reflections from the heart of Read to Grow: our core program teams.*



**Books for Babies Reflections with Cynthia Beuns-Parker, Books for Babies Manager, and Vicki Roberts, Books for Babies Coordinator**

**VICKI:**

**What's been a major milestone for Read to Grow?**

Expanding our hospital program to include prenatal and NICU partners has been a huge step forward.

**What keeps you inspired after nine years at Read to Grow?**

The heartfelt messages from parents never get old. So many take the

time to share how Read to Grow has helped them understand the importance of reading and brain development.

**How do you know Read to Grow is making a difference?**

We've never run out of newborn packets for our hospital partners—that's a testament to our incredible volunteers and their dedication!

**What's next that you're most excited about?**

Expanding the Prenatal Program to more community partners across Connecticut. It's an exciting way to reach even more families early on.

**CYNTHIA:**

**What's impressed you most about Read to Grow so far?**

I'm fairly new, but I'm really impressed with the growth of Books for Babies.

**What feedback stands out to you?**

Hearing from families across Connecticut about how much the *Welcome to the World!* book means to them—whether it's a parent sharing how their child reacted to the book or how meaningful it was to receive it when they gave birth.

## READ TO GROW MILESTONES

**2021**

Read to Grow publishes and distributes 33,000 free copies of *Hello Sometimes/A Veces Hola*, a board book written by Amy Vatner and illustrated by Gabriella Svenningson, designed to support young children with the uncertainties of the pandemic.

**2021**

Read to Grow launches Popcorn & PJs: Virtual Family Story Time, providing hundreds of families with books and virtual, live author read-alouds and Q & As.

### What's worked well for the program?

Building strong relationships with hospital staff has been key. Their support and understanding of how important literacy is for families have helped make the program successful.

### What's next that excites you?

Expanding Books for Babies statewide by launching with the remaining four birthing hospitals in Connecticut—it's going to be exciting!



### Books for Kids Reflections with Linda Sylvester and Evelyn Tomasello, Books for Kids Coordinators

#### EVELYN:

#### Looking back on the past 25 years, is there a moment or initiative you're especially proud of?

One of the moments I'm most proud of is how we supported families during COVID-19. We expanded book access through mailings, launched new initiatives, and partnered with other programs to reach more families. Distributing books during meal distributions in New Haven was particularly meaningful, as was sharing *Hello Sometimes*, our self-published book. That period also sparked Popcorn & PJs, which has been an incredible addition to our work. Our bookmobile and commitment to offering books in 13 languages beyond Spanish are also things I take great pride in.

#### What excites you most about the work you do now?

Providing books to families and building connections with them—those moments are the most rewarding.

#### What makes you confident that our programs are making a real impact?

The feedback we get from families and partners speaks volumes. Families keep coming back, programs continue requesting books, and our events—like Books to Go! and Family Fun Day—draw such a strong response. Plus, the generosity of our volunteers and book donors reminds us that this work truly matters.

#### What upcoming projects are you most excited about?

I'm really looking forward to hosting field trips to Read to Grow, which will give families even more access to our resources. I'm also excited about the possibility of workshops that will help educate families on the importance of early childhood literacy.

#### LINDA:

#### What's been a game-changing moment for Read to Grow?

The shift to online book request forms changed everything. It made

access so much easier for families and programs—no more phone calls or faxed forms! Another big moment was our work after COVID. While many book programs shut down, we stayed active, distributing books through food sites and making sure families knew we were still here.

### What excites you most about your work?

Connecting kids and families with books. Every book we provide has the potential to spark a love for reading. We carefully match books to a child's age and interests to build “book joy” and lifelong readers. I'm also thrilled that Books for Kids now has a larger, welcoming space where families can visit, choose books, and talk with us about reading and local resources.

### How do you know Read to Grow is making an impact?

Families and providers keep coming back, some for as long as I've been here. They tell us how these books have helped kids become readers. The care we put into selecting the best books and fulfilling every request makes a real difference.

### What's next for Read to Grow that you're excited about?

Partnering with all the birthing hospitals in the state! These hospitals and prenatal clinics are where many families first hear about us, and this connection will help even more parents discover our resources early on.



### Bookmobile Reflections with Pam Katynski, Bookmobile Manager

#### Looking back, what initiative stands out to you most?

The launch of the Bookmobile is a big one for me. Seeing our reach across the state every day, we could literally be handing out books daily—sometimes in huge quantities! It's incredible to think about.

#### What excites you most about your work?

I love being out in the community with the Bookmobile, seeing kids choose books for themselves. I also enjoy building new partnerships with organizations that share our literacy goals for Connecticut.

#### What do you think has had the most impact?

It's hard to pick just one program since I work with so many community providers, schools, and resources. For me, it's about the whole team effort—Read to Grow works with so many others to make a difference.

#### What's next for Read to Grow that excites you?

The need is huge, and I'd love to see multiple Bookmobiles reaching all corners of the state. When someone mentioned a “fleet” of Bookmobiles, I thought it sounded impossible—but now I can totally see it, and I'm excited about the idea!

## 2023

Read to Grow launches its first Bookmobile, with wheels touching down for its first official stop in Norwich, CT.



## 2024

Read to Grow secures state funding in the 2023–2024 biennium budget, providing support for rapid expansion of the Books for Babies Newborn Project in partner hospitals around the state.

Visit us at  
**[www.readtogrow.org](http://www.readtogrow.org)**

**f: ReadtoGrowCT** **ig: readtogrow**

## Books, Beginnings, and a New Chapter with Fair Haven Community Health Care

Fair Haven Community Health Care (FHCHC) is a Federally Qualified Health Center serving more than 36,000 patients each year—70% of them children. Rooted in New Haven and surrounding communities, FHCHC provides compassionate, comprehensive care to families who are underserved or face systemic barriers to health and wellness.

Nearly 28 years ago, a simple interaction helped spark a statewide movement for childhood literacy. During an event at RJ Julia Booksellers in Madison, CT, Roxanne Coady—owner of RJ Julia's and soon-to-be founder of Read to Grow—had a conversation that would change everything.

FHCHC's beloved pediatrician, Dr. Laurel Shader, reflected on the magic that happens when a child is given their very first book at the clinic. That conversation planted the seed for Read to Grow, an organization now dedicated to promoting language and literacy from birth and empowering parents as their

child's first teacher.

In many ways, FHCHC was the precipice for Read to Grow's beginning; now 25 years later, Read to Grow has partnered with our prenatal care providers to provide books and messaging to expectant families, encouraging early literacy as a cornerstone of both maternal and pediatric care.

Now, this special relationship is coming full circle. In partnership with RJ Julia's, Read to Grow will launch a new campaign to fill the waiting room of FHCHC's main clinic on Grand Avenue with beautiful, new, culturally relevant children's books—for an entire year. Books will be delivered monthly in English, Spanish, and Pashto to reflect the rich diversity of the families served. Children are encouraged to choose a book and take it home—a small but powerful act that may just shape their own story.

Fittingly, this new initiative is to be named in honor of Dr. Shader, who just this month retired after 32 years of service and care at

FHCHC—and whose words helped inspire our founding.

We're proud of this shared history, and even more excited for what's ahead. Please visit the Read to Grow website to learn more about how to donate to support the books for the Book Nook.

— *Maggie Moffett, Chief Advancement Officer  
Fair Haven Community Health Care*



*ED Suzannah Holsenbeck and Dr. Laurel Shader celebrate Dr. Shader's 32 years of service to children and families in Fair Haven.*