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Photo by Nakeshia Shannon

A LIFESAVING INTERVENTION: LITERACY

COMMUNITY PULSE

Shayla Larsen, Sandi Smith & Ann Copeland,
The Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate

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COMMUNITY PULSE

Volunteer Tutors Help Children Who Struggle To Read

KATHY LAUGHLIN

It's unlikely that you're thinking about each letter and word as you read this paragraph; you scan the text and understand it faster than you can skip to the next line.

You may not even remember learning to read.

"I thought I could always read," says Ann Copeland. "My mother said, 'I taught you with phonics by reading your sister's baby food jars. You were just too little to know what we were doing.'"

But many children struggle to read — because they have dyslexia, because English is not their first language, or for reasons that may never be diagnosed.

The Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate is trying to reach those children, specifically those who are economically disadvantaged, by training volunteer tutors to help them learn to read. Copeland and Sandi Smith are co-Executive Directors of the nonprofit organization.

"Statistically, one in five students has dyslexia to some degree. Only a very tiny percentage of those kids' parents can afford to hire an educational psychologist to do a full evaluation," Copeland says.

In 2019, 68% of fourth-graders in South Carolina were not proficient in reading, according to a study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Augustine Literacy Project tries to reach children in kindergarten through third grade, Smith says.

"My message to parents is: If your child is struggling with reading, get help. Reading problems are not solved with time; they are solved with intervention. Get help now," Smith says.

Without intervention, 74% of poor readers in the third grade are still poor readers in the ninth grade, according to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.



Students served through the Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate show off their reading materials, supplies, and smiles.

For youths who enter the juvenile court system, 85% are functionally illiterate; and 75% of the adults in American prisons cannot read above a fourth-grade level, Smith says.

"It can be devastating," she says. "We see this as a life-saving intervention."

Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate was founded in 2006; since then, its tutors have delivered more than 12,000 free reading lessons to 425 children, primarily in Greenville, Spartanburg and Anderson counties.

Children are referred to Augustine, with permission from parents, when a

school or after-school program identifies a child who is at least one year behind in reading, reading comprehension, writing, or spelling — and qualifies for free or reduced-price lunches, indicating low socioeconomic status.

"We talk a lot about dyslexia. But the mission of Augustine is all-encompassing, for whatever reason a student struggles to read. Maybe both of their parents were working two or three jobs, and nobody talked to them as a baby. There are lots of reasons why students struggle to read. At Augustine, we take all comers. You don't have to have a di-

agnosis of any sort," Smith says.

Shayla Larsen discovered the program while seeking resources for her son, who has severe language challenges. Trained to be a tutor in 2019, she is now the main contact for tutors and trainees. She recruits tutors, coordinates with schools and community centers to place tutors, and promotes awareness of the organization.

Larsen's son was tutored by Smith, who trained in 2016 and has a child with dyslexia.

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The 70-hour training is a big commitment, the three women agree. About half the training is online; the rest is in-person on three non-consecutive weekends. After training, Augustine asks that a volunteer agree to work with one child for 45 minutes, twice a week, during one school year.

The training is more comprehensive than the casual Book Buddy program at schools.

Copeland worked with one boy for four years as a Book Buddy. He would listen, could answer the questions she asked about the story, but he couldn't read a word. In 2010, she learned about Augustine.

"That summer, I took my two weeks of vacation from work and went through the training. I have been volunteering to tutor kids ever since," she says.

Reading a book with a child is valuable, Smith says. "I'm not criticizing the schools, but that one-on-one, consistent, customized attention is not something that schools can offer. Our tutors attend a training program with practicum lessons. We

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**Sandi Smith, Co-Executive Director
Augustine Literacy Project
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feel very confident that they're qualified to teach reading in a multi-sensory, systematic way. We know that all children can learn to read this way."

Children are excited about the one-on-

one attention, Larsen says.

"They get that extra help. And it is personalized. It takes a few lessons to have them trust you and know that you're going to keep coming and care about their success. Once they know that, and they start to see the changes in their skills, they are happy to work with you," she says.

Lessons are far from monotonous.

"When a child is doing the lesson, they're seeing it, they're hearing it, they're touching it," Copeland says. "They're seeing a letter, they're saying it, they're hearing it anchored to the 'A' sound in 'apple.' They're writing the 'A.' All of that is happening at the same time."

Children might jump on a letter or trace it on the wall.

"The more movement that we can incorporate in the lessons, the better the information sticks, and the easier it is to keep them focused," Smith says. "We have a radically different approach to teaching reading that has been proven to work for almost all kids everywhere."

Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate has 51 tutors. Neither they nor the administrators are therapists or diagnosticians, but they are committed to helping children. And the organization needs more volunteers.

"The science of reading shows that our approach is very effective. It can be learned — even by people like me, who came out of a cube as a computer programmer," Copeland says. "People can learn to do this and do it well."

The satisfaction is unmatched, Smith says. "Watching those light bulbs go off for your student, seeing the pride that they build in themselves, turning non-readers or struggling readers into skilled readers ... It's thrilling.

For Copeland, the Augustine Literacy Project's motto says it all: "Tutor one child, and it changes two lives."

To volunteer or obtain information about Augustine Literacy Project, go to www.augustineproject-upstatedesc.org or call (864) 416-1176.

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