

making a difference

HONOLULU Magazine, May 2009

A family literacy program inspires kids to read

Books as Building Blocks

Reading and school were always a challenge for Jed Gaines, who is dyslexic. So when Gaines became a parent he wanted to make sure his children did not have the same difficulties. "I knew there was a 50-50 chance that my children would possibly have learning differences - I call them differences not disabilities - so I just wanted it easier for them when they went to school and in life," says Gaines. He went to the library and checked out Jim Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook* which highlights the power of reading to children. Eight years later Gaines founded the local family literacy nonprofit, Read Aloud America.

Gaines and his volunteers hold Read Aloud Programs (RAP) at qualified Title 1 schools (schools in which more than half of its students receive free or reduced-price lunches.) Each semester Read Aloud America conducts six family sessions at eight elementary and middle schools statewide. The non-profit keeps afloat through funding from the state Department of Human Services. It received a four-year grant for \$3.1 million in 2007 (although budget cuts may shrink that amount). Participating schools pay up to \$1,000 to hold RAP sessions for the semester.

All sessions are free and open to that school community and held every other week from 6 to 7:45 p.m. It's not, however, an extension of school with two hours of straight reading. After 300 to 600 students and parents or guardians pack into the school's cafeteria, Gaines or one of his presenters kicks things off with Frisbee tossing and trivia, while music pumps in the background. The children then go into different classrooms where they are read to at their grade level, while the adults remain in the cafeteria. The presenter answers questions and talks story before reading to them. "People don't even realize that they're in a reading program," says Gaines. "RAP is nonthreatening."

The sessions are designed to make reading an enjoyable and positive activity and differentiate it from necessary school work. Gaines also tries to inspire parents or guardians to read to their children, cut away from time watching TV or surfing the Web

"I consider our program 40 percent literacy and 60 percent family. Family is the key."

— Jed Gaines

and build a strong family bond.

"I consider our program 40 percent literacy and 60 percent family," says Gaines. "Family is the key, whatever the family unit is."

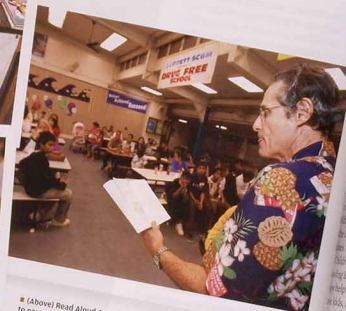
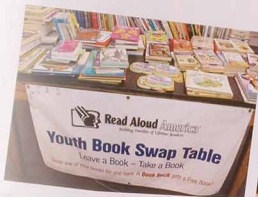
"They don't embarrass any parents," says Anne Hung, who has attended two RAP sessions with her husband and three young children. "It makes us want to read to the children even more and want to shut off the television and spend time with the kids."

A presenter may read to the adults from author Alan Brennert's *Honolulu* or a best-seller such as *Tuesdays with Morrie*, or even John Rosemond's parenting columns. "Within three minutes you can drop a pin in the cafeteria and hear it bounce," says Gaines. "That's the power of story."

Children hear stories like *Night of the Howling Dogs* by Graham Salisbury. "I enjoy helping develop a level of reading in these kids, helping open doors for them, because that's what books do," says Mark Valencia, who has been reading to children for Read Aloud for five years.

Valencia, a self-described bookworm and a lawyer who works downtown, travels with

making a difference



Read Aloud America founder and president Jed Gaines reads to parents in Jarrett Middle School's cafeteria in Kalaheo.

By Tiffany Hill

Books as Building Blocks

A family literacy program inspires kids to read. By Tiffany Hill

READING AND SCHOOL WERE ALWAYS A CHALLENGE for Jed Gaines, who is dyslexic. So when Gaines became a parent he wanted to make sure his children did not have the same difficulties. "I knew there was a 50-50 chance that my children would possibly have learning differences - I call them differences not disabilities - so I just wanted it easier for them when they went to school and in life," says Gaines. He went to the library and checked out Jim Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook*, which highlights the power of reading to children. Eight years later Gaines founded the local family literacy nonprofit, Read Aloud America.

Gaines and his volunteers hold Read Aloud Programs (RAP) at qualified Title 1 schools (schools in which more than half of its students receive free or reduced-price lunches.) Each semester Read Aloud America conducts six family sessions at eight elementary and middle schools statewide. The non-profit keeps afloat through funding from the state Department of Human Services. It received a four-year grant for \$3.1 million in 2007 (although budget cuts may shrink that amount). Participating schools pay up to \$1,000 to hold RAP sessions for the semester.

All sessions are free and open to that school community and held every other week from 6 to 7:45 p.m. It's not, however, an extension of school with two hours of straight reading. After 300 to 600 students and parents or guardians pack into the school's cafeteria, Gaines or one of his presenters kicks things off with Frisbee tossing and trivia, while music pumps in the background. The children then go into different classrooms where they are read to at their grade level, while the adults remain in the cafeteria. The presenter answers questions and talks story before reading to them. "People don't even realize that they're in a reading program," says Gaines. "RAP is nonthreatening."

The sessions are designed to make reading an enjoyable and positive activity and differentiate it from necessary school work. Gaines also tries to inspire parents or guardians to read to their children, cut away from time watching TV or surfing the Web

The evening ends with pizza and sodas, as well as raffle giveaways for books and two book-swap tables. While the food and prizes certainly help draw in participants, Gaines maintains that it's not what keeps the cafeteria full. "People aren't coming back every other week for two slices of pizza," he says. "They're coming back because the program works, because it's bringing the family together."

to at their grade level, while the adults remain in the cafeteria. The presenter answers questions and talks story before reading to them. "People don't even realize that they're in a reading program," says Gaines. "RAP is nonthreatening."

"I consider our program 40 percent literacy and 60 percent family. Family is the key." — Jed Gaines

his two eldest kids, ages 17 and 18, to the leeward side where they read to children in Makaha Wai'anae. "I think the kids probably struggle academically more out there and there's a bigger need [for volunteers]," says Valencia. "I get a lot more enjoyment out of helping kids who have a big need."

Valencia tries to instill the lifelong benefits of reading, coupled with his assertion that reading is cool. Per Gaines' training, Valencia and the other volunteers don't question the kids afterward. "No one has to worry about whether they're going to be asked to read or answer anything," he says. "It's very rewarding when you finish because you're making a difference in these kids' lives."

The evening ends with pizza and sodas, as well as raffle giveaways for books and two book-swap tables. While the food and prizes certainly help draw in participants, Gaines maintains that it's not what keeps the cafeteria full. "People aren't coming back every other week for two slices of pizza," he says. "They're coming back because the program works, because it's bringing the family together."