

Creating a More Literate America

By Sharon Darling & Pete Osman, LtGen., USMC (Ret.)

Many of us have fond childhood memories of being nestled under the covers of the bed as our mom or dad read a favorite story that took us to a magical place of discovery. Those bedtime stories created more than just fond memories; they were the foundation of our success in school and, as a result, of our careers.

But far too many families can't foster that love of reading and knowledge because they don't have access to the resources they need, including books. Research indicates that in low-income neighborhoods, the ratio of books per child is one age-appropriate book for every 300 children, and two-thirds of American classrooms have fewer than 50 children's books. There are even schools that serve the American Indian population where no reading material is available for students.

The ability to read is the foundation on which the rest of a child's education is built. In recent years, we have witnessed a promising trend of improved reading scores among school populations that have long trailed the rest of the nation. Unfortunately, cutbacks associated with the recession have put these gains at risk.

Even before the financial crisis, the National Center for Educational Statistics released a report asserting that 33 percent of all fourth graders in this country still cannot read at grade level. This puts at risk their futures and their ability to become actively engaged adults and productive members of society.

Sadly, we don't need to look very far to find examples of adults who are struggling because they lack the ability to read. Many have become very adept at hiding this inability, while, on occasion, others summon the courage to step forward and ask for assistance.

Earlier this year, we had the privilege of meeting Alferd Williams, a 71-year-old sharecroppers' son who never experienced the joy of learning to read. At age 70, he decided his dream had been deferred too long and he enrolled in a first-grade class in St. Joseph, Mo., where he is a star pupil and inspiration to all who know him.

Alferd's story is a compelling illustration of the impact of a family's poverty on its children. But it's also an inspiring reminder of the power of the dreams and doors that reading can open.

Alferd's history is being repeated even today, in a time when homelessness, poverty and itinerant living rob too many of our children of the gift of a good education. Unemployment is 61 percent higher for people age 25 and older who haven't earned a high-school diploma. In turn, opportunities for their children are threatened, since parents who struggle with reading and life skills are more likely to have children who don't succeed in school.

November is National Family Literacy Month. It is a wonderful opportunity for families to share their favorite books and to spend a few minutes reading their favorite stories together. It's also a time to reflect on what each of us can do to ensure that every American child experiences the joy of opening the covers of a book and stepping into a world of magic, wonder and wisdom.

As a nation, we cannot allow children to pass into adulthood like Alferd—without the basic fundamental skills of reading and writing. The financial ramifications of illiteracy are staggering. United Way estimates that the cost of illiteracy to businesses and taxpayers is \$20 billion per year. As overwhelming as this may seem, there are simple steps each of us can take to make a difference.

As the holiday season approaches, consider donating a child's book to a local toy drive. Think back to your own childhood and a book that was a particular favorite. Purchase a copy of that book and share its magic with a child who may not know the joy of having a book of his or her own. There are also well-established literacy programs throughout the country that rely on public support. Even the smallest donation can make a significant difference.

Despite the recent economic challenges, our nation has once again displayed its resilience and ability to face adversity head on. We are confident that as a nation we can end illiteracy and offer every child a promising future.

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