

## 'Real Men Read' helps show kids that books are fun

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Between their teachers, their principal and school staff members, Edgewood Primary School students have no shortage of women to look up to.

To be fair, the students in Lindsey Ellis' kindergarten class look up to most adults. The children aren't much taller than the yardstick Ron Beatty used to give the students an idea of how much snow covered New York City after last week's winter storm.

Winter storm Jonas dropped 40 inches of snow on the Big Apple, Beatty told the children, who sat "crisscross applesauce" on the floor in front his chair.

"You could make a big, big snowman!" kindergartner William Hosey whispered to the boy sitting next to him.

Beatty always starts his reading sessions with Ellis' students with these miniature lessons. Since October, the retired teacher has visited Ellis' classroom monthly to read aloud a different picture book as a volunteer with United Way's "Real Men Read" program.

Beatty pulled a pair of spectacles from his shirt pocket and cracked the spine of this month's book — "Henry and Mudge and the Long Weekend," by Cynthia Rylant. The children, who only minutes ago were loudly rapping about the worth of pennies, nickels and dimes, sat quietly and listened to the story of a boy, his parents and their big, drooling dog, who spend a rainy weekend building a castle out of cardboard boxes in their basement.

"They do a great job with him," Ellis said of her students. "They're so engaged in what he's saying."

Volunteers like Beatty have been reading in Richland-Bean Blossom, Monroe County and Spencer-Owen community schools' classrooms since 2014, when Duke Energy Foundation provided a two-year grant to the Foundation of Monroe County Community Schools and United Way of Monroe County to start the Real Men Read program in kindergarten classrooms.

Now, United Way is in the midst of fundraising efforts to continue the program, which has distributed 1,970 books to 394 students since 2014, after Duke's sponsorship ends.

"It's important, literally, from birth, to get parents to read to kids," said Ashley Schoolman, United Way's assistant director for community initiatives. "This program specifically targets them when the students are outside of school."

About 62 percent of Indiana third-graders are reading below their grade level, according to United Way statistics. Students who begin reading early have higher high school graduation rates than their peers, which



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Ron Beatty reads to kindergarden students at Edgewood Primary School. David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

United Way correlates to future career and financial success.

After the volunteer men read to the students, each child is given a copy of the book to take home.

“They’re totally awesome,” kindergartner Teigen Hulbert said of the newest additions to his at-home library.

This school year, students such as kindergartner Fini Molica have brought home books including Don Freeman’s “Corduroy,” Leo Lionni’s “Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse,” and “The Day Jimmy’s Boa Ate the Wash,” by Trinka Hakes Noble.

“I read ‘Corduroy’ yesterday, and my brother read a little bit of it,” Fini said.

The presence of volunteers like Beatty in the classroom is as important as their reading, Schoolman said. These students have a much higher proportion of female teachers than male teachers, she said, and mothers are usually the parents students see at in-school activities.

Having an adult man — the Real Men Read program calls them “MENtors” — show students that reading is fun no matter your age or gender and sets the children up for future reading successes.

“I’ve been reading to my grandkids for 20 years,” Beatty said. “I think the kids enjoy it.”



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