Promoting Literacy: It’s Everyone’s Job
by David L. Harrison

Prologue. On April 2, 2009 I was privileged to address the Alpha Chi National College Honor Society conference in Indianapolis. Later I was invited by Dr. Dennis M. Organ to lend my talk for publication in Recorder. My challenge was to take an address delivered from an outline to a more general article without losing too much of the original spontaneity. Maybe it will help if you pretend you are sitting in the audience in Indianapolis. Here goes . . . 

As an author of children’s literature I’ve visited tens of thousands of students over the last forty years. From early on I became an activist for literacy, though even now I struggle for an exact definition of the term. A literate person can read and write of course but surely there is more to it than simply mastering fundamental skills. Doesn’t a literate person develop awareness of surroundings, a sense of community? Doesn’t he or she keep up with the news? Articulate informed opinions? Make a difference? I think being literate involves all of these characteristics, but it begins with that great leveler – reading.

Here’s an example of how reading can make all the difference. Not long ago I was sweeping our back deck. A mat by the door spells in large letters, W-E-L-C-O-M-E, and under the mat I discovered a cluster of bugs. I wondered how such tiny creatures figured they were welcome under my mat. They inspired a poem in one of my books (Harrison, 2007).

bugs
Bugs moved under my welcome mat.
If bugs can’t read, explain that.

I’ve always said that bugs are pests, but bugs who read are welcome guests.

Reading not only helps us know where we are welcome. It also teaches us how to properly use our language. Sometimes the learning process is pretty tough and can be, to some, humorous (Harrison, 2003).

Have It Your Own Way
(Isabelle) (Teacher)

Me and Sally are pals!
I didn’t know you knew her!
Then why did you say, “Me and Sally are pals?”

Sally and I are pals.
I don’t.
Sally and I are pals.
You said it again!
You said,
“Me and Sally are pals!”
Sally and I are pals!

Have it your own way.
You and her are pals.
But I don’t believe it,
And Sally won’t neither!

Writing is the other half of basic literacy and here, too, we encounter occasional problems in the learning process (Harrison, 1993).

I’d Rather Not
To you it’s only homework,
But I’m half wild with fright!
You said to write two pages
And get them done tonight!

Give me a thousand problems,
I’ll work until they’re right,
But Teacher, Teacher PLEASE don’t make me
Write two pages tonight!

I’m really good at reading,
At spelling you’ve said I’m bright,
But the thought of two whole pages
Is turning my hair all white.

Test me till I’m dizzy,
I’ll try with all my might,
Give me a break,
I’m nearly in tears,
I’ll praise your name,
I’ll shout three cheers,
I’ll study hard
For a hundred years,
Scold me,
Whip me,
Pull my ears!
Only DON’T make me write
TONIGHT!

Literate people tend to be smart. Everyone in Alpha Chi is smart, which can be rather intimidating to others. My suggestion is to remember, as you journey through your lives, to be as empathetic as you can for those who don’t
have as many answers as you do. Otherwise, you run the risk of being Bradley (Harrison, 1993).

A Better Answer
Bradley always answers!
We hate it when he answers!
His hand is always shooting up
To make us all look bad.

Teacher says to study.
Study! Study! Study!
Studying isn’t the answer –
It’s getting rid of Brad!

Whatever else is involved in learning to read, there is, I think, some magic in it. If you should be in Phoenix at the Burton Barr Central Library and locate the children’s department on the first floor and walk out into the Children’s Garden and look down, you’re find yourself standing on this poem sandblasted into the sidewalk. I wrote the poem to describe that magic moment in my life when I read my very first book all the way through all by myself (Harrison, 1993).

My Book!
I did it!
I did it!
Come and look
At what I’ve done!
I read a book!

When someone wrote it
Long ago
For me to read,
How did he know
That this was the book
I’d take from the shelf
And lie on the floor
And read by myself?

I really read it!
Just like that!
Word by word,
From first to last!

I’m sleeping with
This book in bed,
This first FIRST book
I’ve ever read!
Such is the power of reading. I know of a six-year-old girl who received a new book (Harrison, 2000). She sat on her mother’s lap and listened to the story over and over. She read it silently to herself. She read it aloud. She asked an adult friend to sit down and listen to her read her new story. She asked the adult to take turns reading with her. The little girl loved the words so much that she began acting out some of the parts, leaping and waving her arms and dancing in exuberant interpretations of what she heard and felt and saw in her imagination. The following morning she took the book to school. There she organized her classmates into teams. As the book was read aloud, the children performed the girl’s choreographed movements.

This is one of those small miracles that happen when a child loves a book. The girl imbued the characters in her new book with her own personality. Henceforth they would march to her rhythm. The words in the storybook were still the author’s, but the joy of discovery and interpretation belonged to the child. She became the director of the story.

Jim Trelease (1982), a longtime proponent of introducing children to literature, says about the importance of reading, “Literature’s words, as opposed to those of the electronic media, offer a wealth of language for children to use. Because good literature is precise, intelligent, colorful, sensitive and rich in meaning, it offers the child his best hope of expressing what he feels.”

That’s all well and good. Who would disagree with Trelease’s wisdom? However, we first have to win the attention of today’s young people who are busily engaged in a myriad of competing activities. They Twitter, Flickr, visit personal sites, and focus on favorite video games. On the move, they haul out cell phones, iPods, iPhones, or Blackberries to call, text message, listen to music, check dates, and e-mail. At home it’s back to the computer or television for more entertainment.

A Kaiser Family Foundation study (2002) found that kids eight to eighteen may average nearly 40.0 hours per week in front of some kind of screen. The only thing they do more is sleep. Kids who are good with language are more likely to succeed in school yet up to one-third of American children enter kindergarten lacking at least some of the skills needed for a successful learning experience. When children are poor readers by the end of first grade, they are likely to remain so in fourth grade.

Why are so many children unprepared to start school? National studies reported by Reading Across the Nation (2007) show that less than forty-eight percent of the nation’s children under five are read to at home on a regular basis. That number drops to thirty-six percent in families below the Federal Poverty Level and thirty-one percent in families where no one completed high school. Across the nation too many children reach school age with more expertise at electronic games than with books and with little background in reading or being read to. There is much to overcome to help such students develop language skills and learn to reason.

Because of the constant innovations in appealing technology, a shrinking number of today’s youth (and their families) have or make time in their hectic
schedules to sit down with a book. The trend is strong but the situation is not hopeless. Rather than looking at this as one enormous, unsolvable problem, we can view it as individual cases that can be helped by individual people determined to make a difference. There is much that each of us can do to return reading and literature to a more prominent place in young people’s lives.

**Become a role model.**

Engage someone you know in interesting word games.

*Tall Tales:* A number of years ago I met an eleven-year-old boy on a cold winter visit to Pennsylvania. His mother had moved them to that community because it offered the kind of special education her son needed. The boy and I enjoyed our visit that evening over dinner and I decided to send him a note when I returned home. I’ll call him Rick. Here’s how it started.

“Dear Rick, it’s so cold in Springfield that a robin in our yard got its tongue frozen to a worm. We had to bring them in and boil them to separate them. The grateful robin went back outside but the worm refused to leave the boiling water. Says this is the first time it’s been warm all winter!”

I didn’t know if Rick would answer, but his mother said she was amazed at how quickly her son grasped the sense of the game.

“Dear David,” he responded, “it’s so cold in Pennsylvania that people’s words are freezing. We have to bring them in by the fire to hear what everyone is saying!”

Our game went on for years. Today Rick is about to graduate from high school. He is going into music and has begun writing songs. He says he loves words.

**Punning:** When our son and daughter were growing up, punning was a favorite pastime. Almost anything would set us off. “He just chickened out,” my son might say about an event at school that day. Immediately the rest of the gang was on task.

“What a dumb cluck.”

“Sure nothing to crow about.”

“Maybe he was afraid to wing it.”

If someone hadn’t contributed yet, the invitation might be, “Just jump hen when you’re ready.” The response? You guessed it: “You know I dislike barnyard humor.”

At that point someone would roll his or her eyes and “Thigh.”

**Co-write poems and stories:** One day our daughter Robin and her son Tyler were raking up sweet gum balls in the front yard. Tyler started griping about the chore. Robin matched his complaint with one of her own. They wound up with this poem for two voices, which made them both laugh.

*Tyler*

I wish the tree was still a sprout.

Sticky balls here, there, and everywhere!

*Robin*

I want it out!

They’re more than we can bear!
I wish they’d go so we could feel the breeze
And jump in the leaves!

Darn you sticky ball tree!

Tyler has now made up other poems with his mom. Meanwhile big brother Kris began writing detailed narrative stories. One day he’ll be a blockbuster novelist because he writes stories by the pound.

**Read to kids:** Whatever else you do with the young people in your life, make sure you read to them. Of all the activities that can make a difference, reading to children ranks right at the top. Here’s a letter from a reader of one of my books (Harrison, 1973).

“I grew up on a dairy farm, the youngest of five daughters. One of my most precious memories is of my grandmother reading to me. *Piggy Wiglet and the Great Adventure* was our favorite. She kept it in the living room, on a small bookshelf that my grandfather had made. My sisters and I would all gather around her rocking chair, two of us on her lap. We used to fight over who got to turn the pages. . . I am now twenty-seven years old and I still remember the opening lines. . . My grandmother passed away this last September at 90 years old. She’d had multiple strokes and often couldn’t concentrate on a conversation or understand what we were talking to her about. But whenever we reminisced about my childhood, and I reminded her of the first few lines of your book, she smiled. I think it was her favorite too.”

Like any other activity, it helps to be organized. When our grandsons were small, we kept a collection of books for them on the floor in our office. The boys soon developed the habit of pawing through the stack and pulling out several they wanted to hear. This always led to sofa time with a boy on either side snuggling in to hear favorite stories or new ones while sharing time and space and love with someone who loved them enough to read to them.

**Volunteer. Instigate. Facilitate.**

**Encourage writing:** Help start exciting projects. Get up a team of like minded individuals and plan something that will make a difference. A few years ago I collaborated with our public school district to create a book written by students. The challenge was to finish in a few words a statement that began with, “What I’ve learned so far is . . . “

In our district of 24,500, 11,000 students K-12 submitted entries and 1,100 of them became published authors in a 160-page book that was edited by volunteers and printed by a local press. We held autographing parties and young authors proudly signed on their pages. Here are examples by age.

What I’ve learned so far is:
- (Age 4) Not to wipe slobber on my daddy’s shirt.
- (Age 5) You can eat a chicken if you kill it.
- (Age 6) Cats only have six lives.
- (Age 7) Think before you glue.
- (Age 8) Boys are worse than I thought.
(Age 9) You can’t keep a boy and girl hamster together.
(Age 10) I can go with eight girls at a time without any of them knowing it.
(Age 11) I like money and I don’t have it.
(Age 12) It’s not hard to kick three boys at once.
(Age 13) If you’re making a C in art, life goes on.
(Age 14) No matter how hard you pray, God won’t clean your room for you.

Variations of What I’ve Learned So Far have been adapted in Alaska, Florida, California, Kansas, and Pennsylvania.

**Encourage Reading:** On another occasion we challenged students in our district to read enough books to make a pile two miles high. With help from librarians I learned that the average thickness of a book (K-12) is one-third of an inch. It would take roughly 190,000 books to pile one mile high. I called the public library and was told that kids check out many more books than that every year so I upped the ante to a stack two miles high – 380,000 books.

With help from the media and “Sky High On Reading” posters plastered all over the place, we promised that if the kids read two miles of books during that school year, we would have a huge party and a plane would fly over at two miles high to show them what they had done. Students took the dare and read over 1.5 million books, enough for a stack eight miles high.

We had a party all right. The plane flew over at two miles high and four guys jumped out in parachutes and landed on the grass nearby. It was a party to remember! By the way, reading scores in the district went up.

**Involve your community:** Does your local school system need more books for its libraries? Then pitch in, round up a committee, and go public with your goal. We call our grassroots group Reading Roundup. We meet regularly to review progress and report back to the public that supports our efforts. Since 2001 we have helped the district add thousands of new titles and replace thousands of worn and obsolete books. Most of the committee members are not teachers or paid by the school district. We saw a need and decided to be people who make a difference.

**Advocate. Speak out. Take a position.**

**Write a letter to your newspaper:** Explain the importance of promoting literacy and why you support such efforts. I often wonder at all the hate letters in the paper. Why are so many people so angry? Only occasionally do I read a pleasant, grownup sort of letter on a topic of general interest to the community. I even saw one the other day about the need to promote literacy! I thought it was a great letter. I wrote it.

**Lobby for literacy:** If you find yourself a member of a civic group, PTA, or other organization where literacy is a logical topic to discuss, speak out! Become that person that others turn to for information.

**Become a public speaker for literacy:** Bone up on the issues. Speak to educators who specialize in that area. Write yourself a good speech and practice it. Volunteer to deliver your talk for local groups.
Write about literacy: Send articles to newsletters, journals, magazines, newspaper, and blogs. Someone must do these things. Why not you?

Tutor a child: If you don’t care for public speaking and don’t have time for writing, become a reading tutor. Now you are truly down to making a difference, one-on-one.

Local politics: Run for your school board. I tried that and won. The following six years were among the most informative in my life. During that period, our board successfully passed a bond issue large enough to build or improve libraries in every elementary school in town.

At this point, dear reader, celebrate that you can't hear me sing this poem. Those in the audience in Indianapolis did. Later a young man told me he enjoyed my talk but suggested that my singing could use a little work. I chose this poem (Harrison, 1999) because it reminds me that we're all in this together. We may have our differences but I like to think it’s what we have in common that binds us together. Besides, I began with bugs under a mat so it seems fitting to close with bugs under a rug.

Love
Said the green-eyed beetle
To his honey doodle bug,
“You’re sweeter than a rose
And I want a little hug,”
So they hugged and they giggled
And a little later on
They had a thousand kids
Called Green-eyed Beetle
And Honey Doodle Bug
And they all lived together
In a snug little rug.

Make yourself a promise.
This may not be a good time to consider such matters. You must graduate, find a job, perhaps get married and start a family. It might be a while before your life takes on anything like a routine. But what you can do is make yourself a note now and keep it in a place where you will run across it in the future. Put the note in the form of a commitment to yourself, a promise that one day you will fulfill. This is what the note should say: “I will be that person who makes a difference.”

It has been my pleasure to address you and share some time together. Thank you for the opportunity. Goodbye, and good luck.
Citations:

I am aware that most of the work cited is my own. Remember, this began as a speech. I used material close at hand. My apologies to all those poets whose work would have done splendidly.

Harrison, David L. *The Mouse was Out at Recess*. PA: Boyds Mills Press, 2005.