

Project LIFT brings families, books together

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



In the rush of everyday life, reading with a child can easily be pushed aside. Couple that with knowing limited English and it can move even lower down the list of priorities.

But thanks in part to a \$1,500 grant from Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock, the Literacy Action of Central Arkansas nonprofit will help Spanish-speaking families rekindle those fun, creative moments with their kids while also learning how to navigate their child's school system through Project LIFT, "Literacy Inspiring Family Transformation."

"Don't be intimidated at all by a level of English proficiency because that's not what this project is about ... this is a time to be with your child and to really secure their footing for learning," said Jenifer Hamel, family literacy program coordinator and VISTA member. "These books all have such wonderful stories to tell and we're giving children the opportunity to kind of take the lead. It's going to let parents see their children kind of shine."

Morgan O'Neil, development director of the nonprofit, said the grant from Holy Souls would fund program supplies and instruction materials.

"Traditionally we serve adults ... It was kind of an affirmation that extending our services to an entire family is something our community needs, wants and is helpful," O'Neil said of the Holy Souls grant, one of five total they received from other organizations.

Chris Schaffhauser, member of the social concerns committee at Holy Souls, said 19 organizations, including Arkansas Hospice, Helping Hand and Birthright, received grants from

\$31,000 set aside from church donations. He said part of the grant could also go toward the coordinator's salary.

"Their mission certainly is a good one ... we want them to be able to come to Mass and there isn't always a Spanish Mass," making English proficiency important, he said. "Like I always tell people — when the Catholics get involved good things happen. It's important for us to get involved and to help."

Literacy Action has been providing English as a Second Language (ESL) classes since the 1990s. Starting around 2013 and 2011 respectively, St. Edward and St. Theresa Churches in Little Rock have had about 650 people go through ESL classes.

For Project LIFT, parents or guardians of children ages 5 to 8 can enroll in the free sessions from Feb. 13 to April 5 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The classes are from 4:30 to 6 p.m. at the Little Scholars Learning Center in Little Rock. They will accept 20 families — one to two parents, guardians or other relatives and up to three children within a family. Free childcare is provided for younger children and snacks will be provided at the beginning of class.

Children will work on fun reading activities that match the theme of that week's book, which can vary from love to determination. The parents will have a different topic each week as well, which may include parent-teacher conferences, bullying, behavioral issues and support in the school systems. Hamel said guest speakers will come in who can also talk about dental and medical health. A volunteer interpreter will be present.

After 30 minutes of separate instruction, there will be 40 minutes of reading activities that families can do together, that the child will lead. The format is spaced so activities last 15 to 30 minutes, which can model the time parents may have to read each day with their children.

There will be free books to take home each week and 10 more at the end of the seven-week program to "start a home library," Hamel said.

"It's open to anyone who wants to enroll. We've geared our pilot program to more Spanish speakers. That's where we thought the need was in Southwest Little Rock, but native English speakers could benefit from this as well," Hamel said.

Families can register up until the first day of class Feb. 13. Families can register online at literacyactionar.org/familyliteracy/. They can also contact Jenifer Hamel at jhamel@literacyactionar.org or (501) 372-7323, for information or to volunteer.