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AU Literacy Program Impacts Benton Harbor Students

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After a personal thank you and encouragement from Larry Onsager, dean of libraries at Andrews University (center), students prepare to head out on their first visit to Benton Harbor schools to read and get creative with the children.

Artwork by area elementary school students, based on the books Andrews students read to them, on display in the James White Library gallery on the University campus.

AU literacy program impacts Benton Harbor students

During a church-planting course, seminary student Carlisle Sutton was surprised by the demographics of Benton Harbor, a city 15 miles from the campus of Andrews University. The community's problems in the areas of food availability, employment, affordable housing, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and crime are greater than the national averages.

The areas of poverty and education provide examples. In one Benton Harbor school, 92 percent of the children benefit from the Free and Reduced Lunch program. Up to 50 percent of households make less than $25,000 per year. In state testing, Benton Harbor schools fall well below the tenth percentile, meaning that the overall score for Benton Harbor is worse than that of 90 percent of Michigan schools.

With friends, Sutton founded the Human Empowerment Life Project (HELP) to address some of these needs. "HELP was designed to share Andrews' resources with individuals in Benton Harbor," Sutton explains.

Concurrently, Sarah Kimakwa, marketing and reference librarian for James White Library at Andrews University, was building a children's literacy program for schools in Benton Harbor. "I wanted to celebrate National Library Week with the community," she says. When Sutton approached Kimakwa about the literacy portion of HELP, they joined forces. In the spring of 2015, Library and HELP volunteers initiated a reading program for Benton Harbor students in grades 1–4.

"We used a variety of stories with moral values," explains Sutton. "We expanded their vocabularies using key words. After the reading, we talked about the stories, evaluated their comprehension and offered them a creative opportunity." Art supplies were provided so the children could illustrate their learning. The illustrations were taken to James White Library and displayed in the gallery; parents were invited to come and enjoy the display.

"If children are equipped with reading skills, their lifelong learning is enhanced," says Kimakwa. "They are more likely to become responsible citizens. As we share Andrews' resources, our dream is for the community to regard us as partners."

Says Sutton, "The University's motto is 'Seek Knowledge. Affirm Faith. Change the World.' We want students to realize they don't have to graduate to change the world. They can start now in our own community." Currently, 32 University students from many departments and backgrounds participate in the literacy program. On Fridays, unless the schools have scheduled other educational activities, Andrews University volunteers reach nearly 180 children.

Involved University leadership includes Larry Onsager, dean of libraries, who sponsored the required background checks. Christon Arthur, dean of the School of Graduate Studies & Research, provided funds for art supplies and coordinated meetings.

HELP and James White Library want to give each of the 180 children copies of the four books they've been using. The average cost of one book is $10. You can help by making a tax-deductible contribution at http://www. andrews.edu/go/give (select "other" and specify HELP).

"We hope they will take the books home and share them with their siblings," says Kimakwa. "Communities are transformed through the empowerment of their children."

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