

# READ TO SUCCEED:

## WHITE SOX STAFF COMMITTED TO "WORKING IN THE SCHOOLS" PROGRAM BY JULIANNE BARTOSZ

Learning takes place "Where the Sidewalk Ends" and "Where the Wild Things Are" with friends like "The Cat in the Hat," "Junie B. Jones" and "Madeline."

These children's book titles bring different places and faces to mind for readers both young and old. For 31 White Sox front office staff members, these books are associated with more than their own childhood experiences. They are tools to create new memories with third grade students at McClellan Elementary School through a literacy program called Working in the Schools (WITS).

"WITS provides literacy programs for Chicago Public Schools that support student advancement toward grade-level reading proficiency," said Brenda Palm, WITS chief executive officer. "Our volunteers are advancing students toward better literacy skills, but it's all those great benefits of mentorship that really make an impact, like building up confidence and feeling like someone cares about you and your success."

The White Sox volunteers head four blocks west on 35th Street to join their third-grade reading partners for 45 minutes about once a week during the academic year. Each year, they're paired with a new classroom to read.

"The White Sox program has been one of our shining examples of how powerful our community support is," said Palm. "White Sox volunteers walk into the school and students know them, even those who aren't in the

## Building Communities. Empowering Readers.

program or participated in previous years. The White Sox volunteers have such a presence in the school, and it makes such a difference not only to the students but to the principal and teachers to feel like the White Sox really care about our community and our students."

With such a strong presence, it's no surprise the partnership has had such strong success during its five years. It's more than just this presence. It's the impact the volunteers have on the students.

"Our school was named No. 19 on the list of 'Most Improved Schools in Illinois,'" said Joseph Shoffer, McClelland Elementary principal. "When I found out, I immediately thought of WITS, the White Sox and the work they do here. WITS is a big part of this success; WITS is a part of something big."

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**- BRENDA PALM, WITS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

WITS mid-day mentoring students have consistently outpaced non-WITS students in reading level growth. In the last three years, these students have improved on average by five Fountas and Pinnell reading levels by the end of the program year. This development is aided by the strong relationships built during reading sessions, which reward both the students and the volunteers.

"I really enjoy seeing how something as simple as taking 45 minutes to read with a student can help both the student and volunteer grow," said Michael Mazza, White Sox senior director of ticket operations. "There's a look on volunteers' faces when they're coming back. It's a smile that just resonates amongst other employees. The good or bad days you may have at work change for the better when you get back from the WITS program."

Mazza has been a WITS volunteer for all but the program's very first year. The positive experience he described is immediately noticed by new volunteers like Mascot Coordinator Kyle Matze and Client Services Executive Stanten Jones. Matze and Jones alternate weeks reading with the same student.

"It's really rewarding to see these kids get so excited even though we're doing something that we may take for granted sometimes," said Matze. "With these students struggling with reading, I think it's good for them to get out of their comfort zone and feel comfortable with a trusted relationship that they built."

For Jones, WITS reintroduced him to the joys of reading. He has finished at least three books in his own time since the program began this year.

"WITS is really a highlight for me, because it picks you up in the middle of the day," he said. "It's a way to give back even though it's just a small portion, like if my student doesn't know what a volcano was or how they're formed or where Hawaii is. I can help him by pointing it out on a map. It's those little things that make it all worth it."

Reading is a skill used every day whether we take the time to appreciate it or not, like Matze said. The importance of this WITS program is that the third-grade level is imperative. Palm emphasizes that this as an age when students are forming their identities.

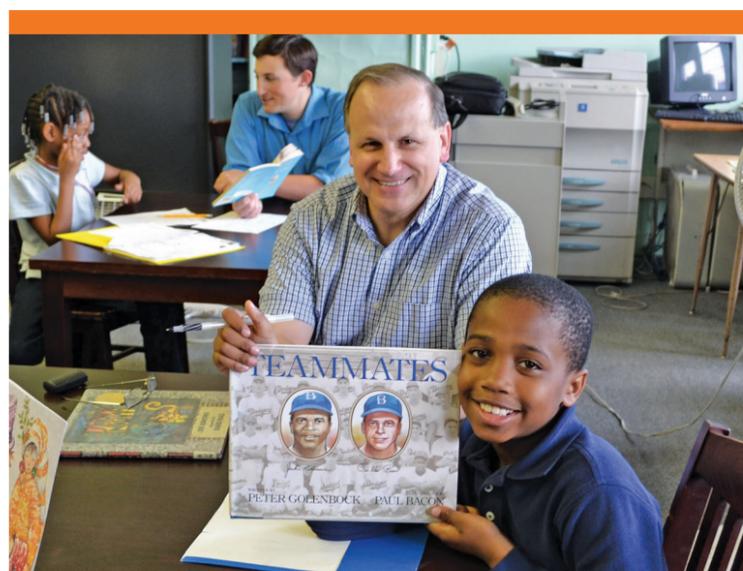
"When we look at our programs, we look at advancement in reading levels and how students identify themselves as readers," said Palm. "If students identify themselves as readers by the third and fourth grade, then they're identifying themselves as successful and able to advance themselves in an academic career. The reality is that if students don't identify as readers and learners, they're going to find a new identity and fall through the cracks."

During its 25 years, WITS mentors have shared more than two-million stories with more than 500,000 students. This year alone, the program has the support of 1,800 mentors in nearly 70 schools to give students the chance to see their potential, both as a reader and as an overall student.



# wits

working in the schools



More than **30** staff members volunteer as mentors each year

**4,000** hours dedicated by White Sox Staff since 2009

More than **520** books donated by the White Sox to WITS students

**200** students impacted