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How Books Transformed the Culture at Children's Village

By Jonann Brady

Lauren Blum greeted Angel, a teen resident at Children's Village, with a hug, and they talked briefly about what he is reading. Angel is one of the stars of the Books for Boys program, an innovative literacy program that Blum has worked with in her eight years as a volunteer at Children's Village, a residential facility for youth in crisis located in Dobbs Ferry.

Books for Boys' mission is to create life-long readers and writers. The group operates on the premise that if you do something you love, you'll do it well. It sounds simple enough, but many of the boys at Children's Village did not grow up in a "reading culture," Blum said.

"The idea is to change the culture by exposing them to books," said Blum, who works as a nurse practitioner. It was not exactly an easy order. Residents of Children's Village have often suffered abuse or neglect at the hands of their parents or caregivers, have bounced around the foster care system, or have been referred by the criminal justice system. In many cases, the boys entering Children's Village read far below grade level. Some have significant emotional and behavioral issues.

First off, Books for Boys volunteers created "libraries" around the campus, including the cottages where the boys live, and stocked them with books that would appeal to the boys, who were told they could read whatever they wanted from the library. "We found interesting books that inner-city kids can relate to," Blum said. "And the cover has to look cool."

Before the Books for Boys program began, Blum said, "It was not a cool thing to be a reader. Now it is." A culture doesn't change overnight, of course, and cultivating these nascent readers took time. "Charismatic, motivated kids can change a culture more than volunteers can," Blum said. "We knew who those kids were. We brought them together, bought them pizza and said, 'You have the power to turn other kids on to reading.'"

Authors like James Patterson (whose *Maximum Ride* books are very popular with the boys) have visited the program to read and answer questions. Participants also write and share their own stories and poetry. Books for Boys is always looking for volunteer mentors to read aloud to groups, occasionally provide one-on-one help, or just be there to talk informally to the boys about what they're reading. Children's Village also seeks volunteers who have the time and commitment to be an all-around mentor to an individual resident – most often a teen who can benefit the most from a solid, positive adult relationship.

The key to volunteering at Children's Village is consistency, Blum said. Many of the boys have never had a consistent adult role model in their lives.

"The kids are a little mistrustful," she said. "You don't see the benefits until you keep showing up. Then you start seeing a difference."

These are kids who crave individual attention and very often blossom when they receive it. "They are so appreciative," Blum said. "They are so sweet to me. They hold the door and carry my books."

Visit the [Children's Village website](#) to learn more about volunteer opportunities.