Free digital books, Storytime Online aids reading in pandemic times

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Early readers in local communities have access to thousands of digital books for no charge through a county initiative with Renaissance myOn Reader that involves many area players, including the School District of Hillsborough County.

Taking it a step further, school board member Stacy Hahn late last year spearheaded Storytime Online, which features local dignitaries reading books to kids, readers include Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister, Tampa Mayor Jane Castor, Hahn, herself, and WWE superstar Thaddeus "Titus" O'Neil Bullard, who played football at the University of South Florida (USF).

"Unfortunately, not all children and youth have books at their fingertips, especially during a safer-at-home order as part of a global pandemic," notes a recent school district news release promoting the Storytime Online playlist, with content provide by Capstone Publishing.

Moreover, living through a pandemic with stay-at-home orders and eLearning requirements makes it even more pressing, Hahn said, for children and families "to have a fun way to engage with words."

Storytime Online segments are available on the school district's online learning platform (Clever) and YouTube channel (HCPSVideoChannel).



STACY HAHN

Meanwhile, the Renaissance myOn Reader gives children through age 8 the opportunity to choose what they want to read in a digital environment, to be motivated to become "better, more confident readers and [to]take accountability for their reading growth."

Children and families enrolled and those not enrolled in Hillsborough County public schools can log in at www.readonmyon.com for anytime, anywhere access to an expanding collection of enhanced digital books with multimedia supports, including an embedded dictionary, text highlighting and audio.

In these pandemic times, Spectrum is offering free Wi-Fi to households with K-12 or college-age students who do not already have a Spectrum broadband subscription at any service level up to 100Mbps. To enroll, call 844-488-8395. Installation fees will be waived for new student households. Wi-Fi hotspots across Spectrum's footprint also will be available for public use.

Hahn has a doctoral degree in early childhood and special education and is the director of professional development and partnerships at the USF College of Education.

On Monday, April 27, she joined a Zoom meeting that recorded Bob Rohrlack, president and CEO of the Tampa Bay Chamber of Commerce, reading, "Whistle for Willie," written by Ezra Jack Keats.

Rohrlack's segment kicks off a series of "special-edition episodes," featuring business leaders, set to run through June 30, in partnership with the Hillsborough Education Foundation, Tampa Bay Chamber and the Scholastic publishing company.

The chamber executive joins other Storytime Online readers, including Taylor Delisle and Susan Tamme, from Tampa Bay Rescue; Tiffany Burns, from ZooTampa at Lowry Park Zoo; and former Hillsborough Schools Superintendent Jeff Eakins. Segments also feature famed children's author Michael Dahl, reading his books, Me and My Dog and Good Morning Superman.

Before Rohrlack began his April 27 recording, Hahn noted that “Children who are around people who read are more likely to develop the skills they need to read on their own.”

Newly appointed Hillsborough County Superintendent of Schools Addison Davis said the online reading initiatives “model the love of literacy” while exposing children to “quality written content.” The aim is for kids “to fall in love with books and to fall in love with literacy.”

A video introducing the Hillsborough initiative also features representatives from Pinellas County, where the school district also is engaged in a myOn Reader partnership.

Michael Feeney, executive director of elementary education for Pinellas County public schools, said the aim is “to ensure that every student, regardless of attending public school or not, has access to books, and high-interest books that are at [the student’s] level.” Once a child sees the value, he added, “it takes on a life of its own.”

Andrew Breidenbaugh, with the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library system, is a fan as well; the system is part of the Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative, which in turn is a myOn Reader partner.

“Encouraging reading, and engaging the community in literacy are the core of what the public library does,” Breidenbaugh said. “When [children] read and practice in myOn, it includes all the other things they do, like social media and being on the computer, and makes reading fun.”

Rounding out the list of myOn Reader Hillsborough initiative partners are Boys & Girls Clubs of Tampa Bay, Children’s Board of Hillsborough County, the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County, Head Start, Hillsborough County government, Tampa Housing Authority, Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA and United Way Suncoast.