

READ USA – Partnering to Provide Free Books!

By Susan D. Brandenburg



During the last few weeks, elementary school children all over Duval County waited eagerly for the mailman, anticipating the delivery of a special package addressed just to them.

Grinning from ear to ear, third grader Sebastian Beckert of West Riverside Elementary fanned his three free books, ordered by him online from the READ USA virtual marketplace. The books will provide Sebastian interesting summer reading, in addition to helping him avoid the “summer slide” in reading achievement that so often occurs between school years.



Sebastian Beckert, 3rd grade, West Riverside

Sebastian is one of approximately 42,000 children scheduled to receive three free brand-new books of their choice through READ USA, a local non-profit that, as READ USA supporter Delores Barr Weaver says, is “an organization committed to a literate community, specifically by providing quality book access, book selection, and ownership to young, eager learners that are economically disadvantaged.”

In 2011, READ USA, which was co-founded by Ellen Wiss and Vanessa Tussey, partnered with Scholastic Books, to hold its first book fair at George Washington Carver Elementary School. Since then, the READ USA Team has annually provided three free books to students at an increasing number of Title 1 Elementary Schools in Duval County. In 2019, READ USA distributed more than 50,000 books to over 16,000 students in



TC Delivers employee Cameron Freeman packs books for mailing as Robert Bierlein and Chris Johnson look on

Title 1 schools, as well as providing new books to teachers in those schools.

“Our 2020 goal was to serve all students in every Duval Title 1 Elementary School as well as community centers and early learning centers – that’s 81 schools, 5 centers, 42,000 students - with over 150,000 new books for their home libraries,” said Ellen Wiss, CEO of READ USA. “Then Covid-19 came along, and we had to change direction from physical bookfairs where children choose their books and take them home to creating a virtual marketplace where the books they choose are mailed to them individually. At this point, thanks to many generous individual donors like Cindy and Dan Edelman, and wonderful community partners like the Community Foundation for Northeast Florida (including the Beaches Community Fund and Women’s Giving Alliance), Ascension St. Vincent’s, Tegna Foundation, Jaguars Foundation, PGA Tour and so many others, we are achieving our goal for 2020!”

READ USA’s response to the pandemic has been greatly enhanced by powerful partnerships formed with key stakeholders such as Duval County Public Schools (DCPS), Scholastic Books, First Book, Jacksonville Public Education Fund, Feeding Northeast Florida, TC Delivers, Florida Blue, and countless others in the community.

In March 2020, as a “first responder” in providing books to children who were suddenly isolated in their homes and attending school virtually, READ USA partnered with DCPS and Scholastic Books to provide approximately 38,000 age-appropriate books and parent engagement packets to all DCPS Title 1 Elementary School students. The books were transported safely by school buses that were delivering meals to the schools.

In May 2020, READ USA forged ahead toward achieving their ultimate goal of serving each child at every Title 1 School in Duval County. The process of creating a new approach has been complicated, time consuming, and expensive.

First, Scholastic Books and First Book delivered books to distributor TC Delivers, the organization used by DCPS for large mailouts. At the TC Delivers warehouse on Phillips Highway, thousands of books ordered by thousands of children were sorted and packaged for mailing.

On June 12, READ USA Board members and TC Delivers employees, all wearing the distinctive READ USA red volunteer apron, worked together to fill book orders and mail them out.

Wearing his red apron proudly, TC Delivers Corporate Vice President and General Manager Mark Mazurkiewicz, posed with long-time employee Tiffany Lewis, each of them displaying a colorful book. Smiling, Mazurkiewicz said, “TC Delivers is proud



A panoramic View of TC Delivers – piled high with books – as TC Delivers employees join READ USA board members to get books to kids

to be working with READ USA on such a great initiative, delivering books to children. While all of us are trying to migrate through these uncertain times, especially due to COVID-19, this opportunity serves a major purpose as it puts books in children’s hands to enable their continued reading growth. It’s a WIN-WIN scenario that our organization is happy to be a part of.”

As the work progressed in the TC Delivers warehouse, voices could be heard floating over the bustle of sorting, stuffing and mailing ... “This place has more books than Barnes & Noble!” ... “Did you see the Star Wars books?” ... “I want one of these Princess books for my granddaughter!”

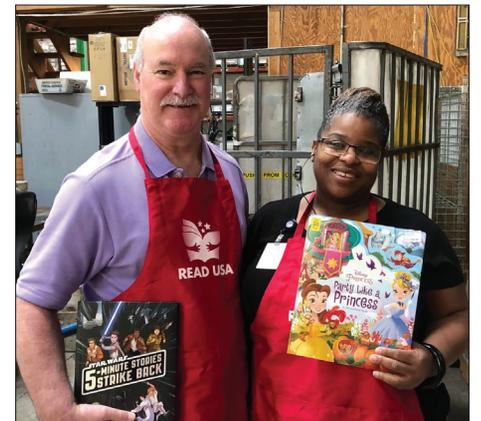
Holding a couple of packages ready to be mailed, TC Delivers Senior Account Manager Chris Liese, commented, “Look around. The pride beaming on the faces of all involved here is inspirational!”

Inspiring indeed, the huge undertaking has engendered a huge price-tag for READ USA and its supporters. “We are believing that all of our funding will come through as promised,” said Wiss, “and we are still asking our community to help us make this happen for even more children who need these books so desperately. It is so gratifying to see the end result – the joy on Sebastian’s face – multiplied by thousands. We can quote statistics all day long about the importance of reading and links between illiteracy and poverty, but when it comes right down to it, books are the essential key to turn Readers into Leaders!”

By engaging DCPS principals and their teachers in the process, READ USA has reached into the homes and hearts of parents



TC Delivers employee Christopher Liese holds some books that are packaged and ready to mail



Mark Mazurkiewicz, senior vice president at TC Delivers and Tiffany Lewis celebrate her 24th work anniversary by sorting books for READ USA

and students with books of their own choice. “READ USA is one of those staircases leading to unlimited possibilities through reading a book,” said RV Daniels Elementary School Principal Lashawn Caldwell, who is also a board member of READ USA.

“We are proud to partner with Read USA to ensure our most at-risk students have access to their own books, providing a pathway to increased literacy, achievement and a love of learning,” said Superintendent Dr. Diana Greene. “Many of us may sometimes take owning books for granted, but for many of our children, this is a rare privilege. I know this by the excitement and joy I always see when children learn they get to choose and keep their own books. It truly touches me to see their reaction, knowing they are more likely to become eager and independent readers. This is a key aspect to strong literacy, and we know that literacy is the gateway skill to all other learning. I am so thankful to Read USA and our community partners for working to give this gift of literacy to our students.”

With summer already in full swing, READ USA has achieved its 2020 Goal and is currently partnering with Kids Hope Alliance, Jacksonville University, and the Mayor’s Youth at Work Program to virtually emulate its 2019 Teen Tutoring Program and repeat its Peace in the Pages event honoring non-violence and the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. To learn more about READ USA, or donate to help them turn the page on poverty, please visit www.readusainc.com.