

Future depends on what's in our kids' heads

By Bill Barth
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Every day we hear about the knuckleheads.

The people who shoot up the place. Who disrupt and disrespect the nation's traditions. Who act out in ways that are offensive and, sometimes, dangerous.

Meanwhile, there are many folks doing their level best not only to do the right things themselves, but also to give a helping hand to others. Let's give them the attention today.

It was my good fortune last week to attend the Beloit Literacy for Life Initiative's 2022 Recognition Luncheon. Like everything else, the pandemic interrupted the group's annual gathering the past couple of years so, technically, this was only the second annual banquet. There should be many more in the future. The entire community ought to be behind this effort.

Yes, it's that important.

The concept is surprisingly simple. Reading and language skills are determining factors in establishing prospects for individual success in life. Think about this: 90% of a child's brain development takes place during a kid's first five years. Those first years are crucial toward getting children ready to learn by kindergarten.

Thus, the Literacy for Life vision statement: Build a Brain, Build a Life, Build a Community. It's a big job, requiring a lot of hands.

"The reality is, if we work together with all of our partners, I see real opportunities for addressing the critical issues facing this community," said Bill Flanagan, retired dean and vice president of Beloit College, who serves as chair of the Literacy for Life program. He and Stateline Community Foundation Executive Director Tara Tinder are key players in the effort, which continues to enlist new partners.



Obviously, any effort to improve society's collective reading skills is catnip for a lifelong journalist such as myself. I've watched with growing dismay as social media addiction has replaced, for many, the habit of reading books and magazines and newspapers. The overall impact is even deeper. Failure to acquire appropriate language skills can ruin a child's future before it begins. That invites all sorts of problems, from poverty to health deficits, even criminality. Knuckleheads aren't born that way. It's an acquired pathology.

The Literacy for Life Initiative suggests a community is not helpless. It can create ways to support families with children. Through the initiative, every mother giving birth at Beloit Health System is shown a video explaining the facts and why it's so important to strive toward early childhood brain development. In addition, each mom and baby go home with a "Brain Bag," containing a toy, a book, and resources explaining ways to support brain development with reading, singing and more. Costs to support the effort have been covered by Stateline Community Foundation to date, but there's a need for more corporate financing. Mr. and Ms. Business Person, think about contacting the Foundation to join the cause. The phone number is 608-362-4228.

If the name Quint Studer rings a bell, it's because he's been a driving force behind the resurgence of minor league baseball in Beloit. Without his expertise and commitment it's doubtful there would be a Beloit Sky Carp baseball team playing at the extraordinary ABC Supply Stadium.

Lesser known in town is Studer's commitment to literacy and early childhood brain development. His work began in Pensacola, Florida where he built a successful business career and then chose literacy as a personal cause. When he got involved in Beloit, Studer discovered the Literacy for Life group and brought much to the table. He was the right choice for last week's keynote speaker.

First, give credit where it's due. Remember the part about new moms seeing a video, and going home with a "Brain Bag?" There was a need for another component, follow-up texts to communicate support for those moms and babies at home. At the event, Studer announced he and his wife will cover the costs for all new moms and babies to receive two texts a week. The first provides ideas moms can use to build their child's brain development. The second explains where their baby should be at a given stage of

development. It's all research based and factual, providing encouragement and support for families during a critical time for the child.

Studer's message stressed the answers to problems communities experience are often right in front of them.

"If you live and work in a community you have a responsibility to make it better," he said, adding it's important "to choose character over comfort."

He said Americans frustrated with education tend to measure academic skills through tests administered at various stages of schooling. Studer argues it's more important to measure kindergarten readiness, because children's brains acquire up to 85% of the ability to learn before ever reaching a classroom.

"We've got to get ahead," he said, while still urging communities not to give up on children who struggle in school.

"The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The next best time is today," he said.

The literacy organization presented several community awards: Visionary Award, Quint Studer; Founders Award, Mary Stuedemann; Corporate Partner Award, Beloit Health System; Cornerstone Award, Beloit Public Library; Youth Partner, Youth2Youth 4 Change, Debbie Fischer; Step Up Award, Jamarr Elliott; First Steps Award, Even Start, Cindy Laube; Advocate Award, Wisconsin Literacy Inc., Michele Erikson; Non-Profit Award, Welty Environmental Center, Brenda Plakans; Community Partnership, PBS Wisconsin, Mouna Algahaithi; Educator Award, Maria Elena White, La Voz de Beloit; Outreach Award, Bookmobile (Gloria Heiss, Kayla Eddy, School District of Beloit).

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