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One for the Books: Retired Lawyer's Gift of Literacy

By MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

It's a whirlwind when Burt Freeman brings a group of 25 third-graders to a bookstore.

Children sit in the aisles and read aloud. They eagerly pull Dr. Seuss and Junie B. Jones from the shelves and page through books on Greek mythology, reptiles, amphibians, anatomy and the like. Some even grab a dictionary.



BURT FREEMAN

The children are "off the wall" with excitement, says Mr. Freeman. For some, it's their first time to browse in a store and to buy a book. This field trip, where each child gets a \$50 allowance to buy books, is the single but simple mission of Mr. Freeman's My Own Book program.

The genesis for My Own Book came casually. Shortly after his retirement in 1998 as a senior managing director and counsel from Bankers Trust Co., Mr. Freeman sought an opportunity to put his family foundation to work. At the urging of his daughter, a retired librarian, he began volunteering at the East Harlem Tutorial Program helping them to set up a computer lab.

He'd often ask the children there about their favorite book. When he began getting blank stares, he started to do some follow-up.

"These children came from homes where the parents weren't interested in taking them to the bookstore, or the parents didn't have the money to do it or both," says Mr. Freeman.

"Furthermore, there were not children's bookstores in East Harlem."

So, he started a small pilot program at the East Harlem Tutorial Program to take children on a book-buying trip. "I'm a retired bank lawyer, a capitalist. And ownership to me was an important issue," he says. "Intuitively, I felt that if children owned books and if they had books at home, they'd have a greater vested interest in literacy."

The program was a hit. He then reached out to the New York City Department of Education and expanded the program to a few public schools. The program now operates in 45 public and four non-public schools, reaching about 4,400 students annually in all five boroughs.

Students work with teachers to select books and school buses transport children to a Barnes & Noble to shop with a volunteer. After the visit, the children give small in-class presentations on their books, often performing skits, reading aloud or making dioramas of what they've read.

To hear Mr. Freeman tell it, the program was supposed to be small with just three or four schools and just him as the only volunteer. "It was designed to keep me out of the pool halls," he said jokingly. He has endowed the program with \$450,000 and contributes about \$50,000 to it annually, raising the rest.

In 12 years, the 85-year-old has shopped with thousands of children and visited hundreds of classrooms, he says. He still does this about three times a week, now with the help of about 80 volunteers, many of them retired professionals. He says his volunteers get a huge kick out of the experience and, in turn, the children feel important because an older adult has taken an interest in them.