

Start Making A Reader Today

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SMART Volunteer

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Photo by Justin Danek

Most writers are also avid readers. Some of us have an almost-religious reverence for words and/or books. I know my parents read to me from the time I was very small and I, in turn, read to my younger brother (okay, so I was reciting the stories from memory) and sister (by then, I probably really read to her). I still have what's left of some of the books I made my parents read to me over and over and over again.

Someone from SMART spoke to the Mid-Valley Lions in Corvallis, Oregon, one night a few years ago. The presenter talked of children entering the

program who had never had an adult read even a single story to them. In tears, I filled out an application on the spot.

I have done many kinds of volunteer work in my life. I can't think of a single one I have found more rewarding. I spend an hour at an elementary school in Salem, Oregon each week. This year, I have two first-graders to whom I read.

When he enters the room, the eyes of one little boy--the kind of little boy who can barely sit still for five minutes let alone a half hour--light up the minute he finds mine. His goal is to get me to read as many books as possible to him in the time we have together.

My other little boy speaks English as a second language. He can sound out the words in Spanish, but it's taken me months to convince him that the same trick works in English. Each month we let the children pick out a book that they get to take home to keep. We give them stickers with their names on it. The first month of the program, I had the honor of giving this second boy the first book he has ever owned in his entire life. I watched him stroke the page with his name now plastered on it with reverence. When he left the table where we read, he had to pause, on his knees, to re-examine the book that now belonged to him.

SMART needs more volunteers. The program truly benefits the students. "By helping children catch up to their peers in literacy development, SMART improves their chances of success in school, and reduces the likelihood they will drop out." But I can tell you from experience that it is the volunteers who are profoundly affected and I urge you to consider sharing an hour of yourself for your own benefit as well as the students'.



If you live in Oregon, you can learn more about the program [here](#). If not, I hope you will look for a comparable program in your own state.