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Rotarians give dictionaries to No. Haven third-graders

By Tiffany Aron, The North Haven Citizen

Third-graders in North Haven will no longer have to wonder whether 'grammer' or 'grammar' is the correct spelling of the word. They will be able to look the word up in a dictionary of their very own and improve their language skills in the process, thanks to a new program that was introduced to students by members of the North Haven Rotary, Club 6745, District 7980 on Jan. 18.

The Dictionary Project is a national, nonprofit initiative that encourages volunteers to donate dictionaries to students in their local communities, and when Rotary President Richard Bassett had heard that other area groups had begun the project in their towns, he proposed the idea to the other North Haven Rotarians.

"My background's education, so I'm all for this," said Bassett, who is a professor of computer information systems at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury.

A subcommittee of the North Haven Rotary's Vocational Service group, including Chairperson Ralph W. Cook, Brian Coughlin and Sara Querfeld, who is also the superintendent of schools in town, coordinated the special project. They used about \$500 from previous Rotary fundraisers to purchase approximately 250 dictionaries, one for every third-grader currently attending one of the town's four elementary schools.

On Jan. 18, pupils at Clintonville and Montowese Elementary Schools received their very own copies of "Webster's Dictionary for Students," which was written specifically with their age and grade level in mind and which contains over 32,000 definitions. The third-graders at Ridge Road and Green Acres will receive their copies on Jan 25.

Coughlin, who was planning on driving the eight boxes of books over to the schools himself, said he was very excited to be part of the new project, adding that the children were not only going to see benefits to their spelling and vocabulary skills but could learn about giving to their community.

"What this instills and what the Rotary tries to instill at a young age is that it is not always about yourself, but about giving back to others. Good things always come back to those who help others," he said.

Part of the rationale for giving 7- and 8-year-old children their own, brand new dictionaries is that they can start developing the habits necessary to become better readers, writers, and creative thinkers. According to the Web site for the project, www.dictionaryproject.org, dictionaries are “the first and most powerful reference tool that a child should own.” By looking words up in an actual book instead of relying on a computer program to complete a spell check, students become more independent and resourceful about solving problems.

Anthony Mancini, principal of Montowese Elementary School, explained that donating dictionaries to third-graders is key, in that it is “a more pivotal year in their education,” a time when students begin to really apply the skills they have learned and are held more accountable for their work. Mancini also said that by having dictionaries of their own, students couldn’t help practicing positive educational habits.

“It’s a good chance for them to kick off the start of an academic career,” he said.

After receiving their dictionaries, the 20 students in Lynn Pomitcher’s third-grade class at Clintonville could not stop flipping through their new books, even as they walked back to their classroom. Some decided they were going to take them home right away, while others considered keeping their new dictionaries at school for awhile. Caley Kellerman thought she would keep hers in her backpack and carry it to and from school, so she could look things up from either place. Reilly Moran, who wrote her name in her new dictionary as soon as she got back to her classroom, said that she is already in the habit of using a dictionary to look up new words that she hears on television. Sonika Komal was sure that the dictionaries were going to come in handy during science class, where she encounters the most unfamiliar words, though she thought about bringing her copy home, too, so that she could share it with her older sister, who sometimes has a difficult time with “hard words.”

The students at Clintonville were not told that they were receiving the dictionaries until the morning of the event, so they had not yet told their families. Many couldn’t wait to share the news. Samantha Crosby told her class that when she was younger, she used a dictionary to learn more about train conductors, which is what her father does for a living. Kristen Amarone was certainly going to tell her brother about the gift.

“I need one because when I play Scrabble with my brother, he comes up with crazy words a lot,” she said.

Bassett said that while it is too early to comment on whether the Rotary will make the project an annual event, he believes that the entire club is in favor of handing out the dictionaries, which is not true of other proposals.

“Always when you come up with a new idea, there are dissenters. But that’s not true with this dictionary project. There’s hardly any downside to this at all,” he said.