

# NOVEL WAYS TO READ

Program shows how child literacy can bloom when words, pictures come to life

STORY *Dan McCann* PHOTOGRAPHY *Chris Christen*

Surrounded by attentive families, an open book in her hands, Debra Paris is in her element and, this particular evening, she's wearing a regal purple-and-gold crown.

"I like to get into costume for a character that I'm reading about," she says. "I just like to bring the story to life."

The story, in this case, is "King Bidgood's in the Bathtub." Paris is holding court at one of the Learning Community Center of North Omaha's Prime Time Family Reading Nights, using her animated style of storytelling to emphasize to the kids, parents and caregivers that reading can be high-energy, highly interactive and fun.

"When I'm telling a story, I like to involve everyone who is listening," Paris says. "I like to use my voice and tone to make the story interesting. If we have to moo like cow in that story, then I want us all to moo like a cow."

She also makes a point to engage kids in a craft or other activity that relates to the story at hand. For the King Bidgood tale, she arranged for a bubble machine and coloring sheets.

Reading, for Paris, is a lifelong passion. The veteran educator hopes to inspire a similar excitement in parents and caregivers so they can pass it on. Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties programs are anchored in the belief that parents are a child's first and best teachers. When the lesson involves reading to them, the potential benefits are voluminous – from building vocabulary and letter recognition to boosting school readiness and grade-level reading skills.

"When the child is ready for school, they'll have a head start, and they'll continue to develop a love of reading as they grow older," says Paris, an Omaha Public Library partner-in-residence at the Learning Community Center of North Omaha. The Learning Community partnership with the library is part of a research-based approach to support family engagement in education.

"When families establish a reading routine, the whole family



looks forward to it. Reading strengthens the bond between parent and child," says Jamalia Parker, Family Engagement Services director for the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

Whether Paris is sporting a crown to share the story of a tub-loving king or donning her head-to-toe llama costume for an active reading of "Llama Llama Hoppity-Hop," she is all in when it comes to promoting literacy and the upside to

academic achievement. But she says, "You don't have to dress up like I do."

With or without a costume, there are easy and effective ways for parents and caregivers to make reading come alive as a family routine. Back-to-school time is a perfect time to start!

**Set aside designated (and fully unplugged) family reading time,** even if it's only 15-20 minutes a day.

**Get into it!** When reading, use voice and tone and bring in different sounds.

**Read everywhere.** If you're in the car, point out words on road signs and billboards. If you're going to a restaurant, read the menu together.

**Pair reading with interests and activities.** Whether your child is interested in arts and crafts, cooking or soccer, find books that tie into those subjects. If a trip to the zoo is on the horizon, read about the animals you'll be seeing before you go. (Through the Omaha Public Library's Partnership Pass Program, library cardholders can get free passes to Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, Omaha Children's Museum, Fontenelle Forest and Lauritzen Gardens.)

**Where are the "Wild Things"?** As you read to your child, ask questions and talk about what's happening in the story. This is a great way to build talking, listening, comprehension and problem-solving skills.

**Not sure which books to choose?** Once school is back in session, ask your child's teacher for reading suggestions.

## FAMILY READING NIGHTS

Family Reading Nights are part of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy County's Prime Time Reading program, a six-week class designed to show parents how to make reading active and fun. Supported by Nebraska Humanities, Prime Time Reading is offered several times a year at both the north and south Omaha Learning Community Centers. Learn more at [learningcommunityds.org](http://learningcommunityds.org)