



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“We wanted a public program with scholars, books and humanities themes and concepts ...We established partnerships with libraries, with which we have cooperated for a decade on adult reading and discussion prog-rams, because they are the only cultural organizations existing in every parish of the state...”

-From the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) grant application, for the Prime Time Reading Time

Someone recently told me about a library literacy program called “Prime Time.” It sounded interesting, so I decided to find out more about it.

The first thing I discovered is that it was created by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, in 1991. The full name is Prime Time Reading Time and it is described on the American Library Association (ALA) website as: “an award-winning reading and discussion and storytelling series, based on illustrated children’s books.” After its beginning in Louisiana, it was expanded nationally through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), in cooperation with the ALA Public Programs office.

The program itself is for what are called “underserved” families, with children ages six to ten, although there are also separate activities offered for younger children. Each family

involved in the Prime Time program takes a book home for the week, and then returns to the library to listen to a storyteller read the book aloud. This is followed by a discussion about concepts in the book, like compassion, loyalty and ingenuity. Excellent children’s literature is used, so that it is compelling for everyone.

Some of the libraries hold this program in two languages – like the Martin County Library system in Florida, where it is offered in Spanish and English. And some of the programs are held at school libraries, like ones reported in an October 2, 2004, story in the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, Louisiana.

The aim of this program is to encourage families to read and discuss books together, and it has successfully met this goal for the thousands of parents and children who have participated. And it is not just about discussion. As Dana Eness, associate director for

LEH says in the *Times-Picayune* article: "We're taking it beyond a typical story time by talking about issues that are central to our lives, which is actually what great literature is about."

What is interesting to me about this program is the use of libraries – whether school libraries or public libraries – to bring about social change. On the LEH website (www.leh.org), the question is asked: What does Prime Time do? The response not only answers this question, but, to my mind, summarizes much of what a library can do for its community: "It reinforces the role of family as a major social and economic unit... it teaches parents and children to read and discuss humanities topics (history, literature, and ethical issues, such as fairness, greed, honor and deceit) as a way of fostering high academic expectations and achievements in low-literacy, low-income

families; it encourages... parents to enter or continue their own educational programs, whether GED or other training, and enter the workforce..."

There is much discussion in the library world about the role of the public library. For some communities, the library may seem to be most of all a place to get information – whether it is in books, from computers, or in the heads of the librarians. But for many, libraries are places to take classes, like computer instruction; to be introduced to new ideas, in talks or book groups; or to be entertained, as with a puppet show or film. It is programs like Prime Time that help these public libraries become what the ALA Public Programs office describes as "cultural centers in their communities."