

THE OLA's FOREST® OF READING

How Canada's largest reading program began

THE CONTEXT

In the 1960's and into the 1970's, there were a myriad of library programs being offered that supported recreational reading activities. Teacher-librarians regularly met with young readers who craved new materials and they recommended titles, classic and contemporary, to slake their interests.

In the 80's there was mounting pressure to have school library collections support curriculum interests, leading to growing emphasis on the teaching of research skills. As a natural result, reading programs began to take on less import.

THE BEGINNING OF OLA'S INVOLVEMENT

In the early 90's, the Ontario Library Association conducted a small survey about programs being offered by school libraries. The results were shocking. Only a handful of general reading programs were still taking place in schools. As shocked as anyone, was OLA Executive Director Larry Moore. He was a great believer in the seminal importance on lifetime reading habits of reading for pleasure. Having been a secondary school librarian himself, he knew how students could get wrapped up in their reading and how it spurred their abilities in general. His Deputy, Jefferson Gilbert, had not been a reader as a young person but was impressed by the discussions that grew out of their discussions of the problem that was at hand.

UNEXPECTED CATALYST

Moore and Gilbert did a lot of travelling to observe other associations and their program ideas. In 1993 the two went to San Antonio, Texas to the Texas Library Association (TLA) conference to better understand how TLA had built their conference and membership into the largest state-level library association on the continent. Demographically, Texas was remarkably like Ontario. It had similar huge geographic area with large cities spaced out. There were similar numbers of school boards, schools and libraries. Populations were very similar.

Over the course of their time in San Antonio, Moore and Gilbert observed that TLA clearly thrived on the much larger involvement of its teacher-librarians. At the heart of this involvement was a near-compulsory Grade 4 to 6 reading program called the Texas Bluebonnet Awards. Each year, schools were given a list of book titles for children to read and to vote on for their favourite book. The program was hard to ignore given the central place author autographing took in the mammoth exhibit. There was also a booth selling support materials from videos and promotion ideas to the books themselves. The final luncheon at the TLA conference to announce the results of the children's vote was sold out. While their trip was to assess the membership and program of TLA, Moore and Gilbert were actually taking away an idea for a program that could be modelled, adapted and introduced to Ontario.

THOUGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

While the 1000 plus luncheon was sold out, It was observed that those in attendance were adults – not kids, the ones for whom the Bluebonnet Awards had presumably been built. Moore

and Gilbert scoured the TLA conference for everything they could learn and it soon became clear that, good as the Bluebonnet program was, there was much more that could be done in Ontario to make the program and its reader involvement unique.

On the trip back to Toronto, the possibilities were explored. The principal mission of the program was to re-stimulate school library interest in reading through the promotion of reading for pleasure. Moore and Gilbert could see that such a program could provide a focus for Canadian books – teaching a new generation about Canadian authors, illustrators and publishers, even Canadian culture itself.

To give control to the kids, roles were suggested for a formal, secret, “municipal-style” vote, where the children became scrutineers controlling the balloting through to the tallying and presenting of results. Moore and Gilbert could see that the ceremonies, where the awards would be given, could be run by the kids, from hosting to presenting.

A full-blown proposal for a Grades 4-6 reading program describing these possibilities was taken to the OLA’s Libraries Advance Ontario Committee for consideration. It was a brilliant group and they embraced the proposal immediately. Among its many champions were Chair Paula deRonde, past OLA President, Allison Craig, a teacher-librarian from Ottawa and OLA President-elect, and Linda Helson, the Ontario School Library Association’s President. The Committee refined the ideas in the proposal, adding their own for a program kit for teacher-librarians. The first list of fiction and non-fiction titles (the Texas Bluebonnet Awards were only fiction) with a host of promotion ideas were delivered in pre-stuffed file folders – ‘instant programs’ for teacher-librarians who no longer had time to develop things on their own.

In the spring of 1994, the Silver Birch Awards was under way. And the Forest of Reading was born. Over the coming months, Gilbert would refine a business model for the new program and Moore would develop a structure and commitment that would eventually involve hundreds of volunteers.

THE UNEXPECTED RAMIFICATIONS

By the time the Silver Birch Award program made its first appearance, Ontario and OLA were teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, Government programs such as Rae Days and the Social Contract were killing morale in libraries and schools as cutbacks started to emerge. At first the Silver Birch Award program was embraced by teacher-librarians who saw in it a way to make an impression in their schools, just as their role was being threatened. Students were almost an afterthought.

As the program gained traction, the Silver Birch Award started to attract the attention of principals and teachers who encouraged its adoption in ever-widening circles, providing teacher-librarians with the support they needed – in many cases, without having to take the initiative.

Five years later, a program for Grades 7-9 would be built in response to school demand for it – the Red Maple Award program – the second tree in OLA’s Forest of Reading. In 2009, there are



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eight reading programs in the Forest, covering all English-language age groups from pre-schoolers to seniors, and from those learning to read to those reading French-language texts.