

Vicki Yonts, program manager for SOAR, an early childhood education initiative in Muhlenberg County in Kentucky, could also be called the First Lady of Literacy thanks to the tireless effort she puts forth to encourage reading in her community.

Funded by the Felix Martin Foundation, Vicki has launched reading initiatives in virtually every sector of her county. Believing that reading and getting books in the hands of young children fosters stronger students and a love of learning, Vicki has worked with community leaders, librarians, teachers, day cares, law enforcement and government officials to create a network of book giveaway opportunities for children.

Since 2011 when she began as director, Vicki has given away more than 200,000 books through innovative programs that include:

- Reading Posse – books are given to children by the police department when called to homes on domestic violence calls.
- Ride and Reward – children who behave well on county school buses are given a book each week by the bus driver as a reward.
- Mayor’s Reading Club – the mayor reads to Head Start up to third grade students three times a year and children receive a free book at each event.
- Read 15 – books are given to parents who promise to read to their children 15 minutes each day.
- Books and Cream – each summer, SOAR sponsors a monthlong event in July at the Renaissance School (where Vicki and her assistant Samantha Tedders share a spacious office), where children read and play in a special room and are rewarded with books and free ice cream.

“This is the best job in the world because I can see the results of our hard work,” said Vicki. “And while I talk with lots of educators and early childcare providers every day, my participation in KSSLA is giving me networking opportunities to see how I can do more to help children develop a true love of reading.”

Vicki’s KSSLA mentor, Kathy Read, was so impressed with her that she asked her to give a presentation at the Lexington forum. “Vicki just inspires me with her energy and passion for early childhood education and I wanted her to share her talent and ideas with our participants. She did an outstanding job.”

Vicki, born and raised in Muhlenberg County, has worked as a volunteer, raising funds for causes such as American Cancer Society and Cystic Fibrosis, and in 2002 began working for a federal grant that serves 20 counties in western Kentucky. In 2011, the Muhlenberg County Board of Education asked her to head up SOAR – which stands for Strategies, Opportunities, Advantages and Resources – when the board of the Felix Martin Foundation realized that there was no kindergarten readiness initiative in the county.

“I had to create this entire program and everyone has been so helpful and welcoming of our efforts,” said Vicki. “Because I deal with so many different types of people, I really benefited from True Colors exercise we participated in at KSSLA. I have a strong personality and have learned so much about how to adjust my communications with people to more effectively get my message across. And Kathy’s mentoring has been so important as she reassures me that we are hitting all the

marks on school readiness. She's also suggested ways for us to reach out to even more counties and share our work."

Vicki has appreciated the leadership sessions in KSSLA and hopes that there will be more opportunities to attend in the future. "I know I'll have Kathy as a friend and mentor for life and I've met some wonderful people in the forums with whom I've developed a friendship. We would all love to continue sharing ideas and experiences in a setting like KSSLA provided."