

HOW THE FOREST OF READING BEGAN

THE CONTEXT

In the 1960s and into the 1970s, 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 1980s, 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 importance.

OLA'S INVOLVEMENT

In the early 1990s, the Ontario Library Association (OLA) 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 readers 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 of the problem 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 in North America. 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 large 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 childrens' 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 modeled, adapted, and introduced in Canada.

THOUGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

While the 1,000-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 as 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 scrutinizers 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 Award program 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

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.

Today, there are 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. As the program gained strength and growth each year, it is now run in libraries and schools across Canada and the world.

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FOREST OF READING

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