

Senators Make Time for Young Reading Partners



Douglas Graham/Roll Call

By Allison McSherry

ROLL CALL STAFF

Tuesday was a busy day for Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) with the Senate toiling away on the controversial FISA bill. But among his Congressional responsibilities is one event he always makes time for: meeting his reading partner, 11-year-old Larasia Ford, at Brent Elementary School in Southeast D.C.

Harkin and his chief of staff, Brian Ahlberg, are participants in Everybody Wins, a program that pairs students in public schools with reading mentors, and Tuesday was designated as "Senate Day" in celebration of the program's 13th year.

Each week Harkin and Ahlberg take turns reading with Ford. But Ahlberg was out of

Sen. Tom Harkin joins Larasia Ford, his partner in the Everybody Wins reading and mentoring program, on Tuesday at Brent Elementary School.

town Tuesday, and a series of votes kept the Senator on the floor. So while she waited, Ford read and laughed with two other volunteers.

Soon enough Harkin burst through the door smiling and took a seat next to Ford. This week the two were reading "Between Madison and Palmetto" by Jacqueline Woodson. "Larasia likes to read a lot," Harkin said. "Larasia gets on a roll and she [reads] the whole chapter."

Everybody Wins has some 1,500 volunteers, and more than 100 are from Congressional offices. Former Sen. Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.) took an interest in the program more than a decade ago and introduced many of his Senate colleagues to Power Lunch, a Tuesday afternoon program that pairs volunteers with students for an hour of reading.

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) also volunteers as a mentor, reading with a first-grader named Lareni Fwann.

"Jim Jeffords of Vermont invited some of
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'Senate Day' Honors Mentoring Program's 13th Year

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us to participate in the program, and I've been doing it since then," Kennedy said.

This week is Fwann's birthday, and the Senator brought a copy of his book "My Senator and Me: A Dog's Eye View of Washington, D.C." as a gift. "This is about my doggies," Kennedy explained, showing Fwann an inscription inside that reads "Best wishes on your birthday. Splash, Sunny and I hope you enjoy this book."

Seated at a small table in the corner of the library, Kennedy explained the definition of a word the two came across while reading "Arthur's Mystery Envelope."

"This is our first year together, and each year we have a good student," Kennedy said. "By the end of the year they read very well. All they have to do after that is some practicing."

Kennedy and Fwann also have read books by Bill Cosby and Dr. Seuss. "Dr. Seuss is a favorite," the Senator said, noting proudly that Theodor Seuss Geisel is from Massachusetts. Many Capitol Hill staffers also participate

in the program, either alternating with their bosses or reading with a separate child.

Eleven-year-old D'Angelo Binning has been reading with Aaron Jenkins, a legislative correspondent for Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), for nearly three years.

"He's fun and every time I need help with a word he tells me to repeat it a million and one times and then we put it inside a log," Binning said. Jenkins then helps him look up the words in the log.

Everybody Wins aims to give children positive role models in addition to improving their reading skills. Many of the students who participate come from troubled backgrounds.

"They may be raised by a guardian or a grandmother," said Mary Salander, executive director for the program. "So having another adult who's there rooting for them is important, because after all, none of us get to where we're going without the help of other people."

Sen. Edward Kennedy reads along with Lareni Fwann on Tuesday.



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