

# Children can thrive on a little bit of fiction

Stephen Beaven  
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In a vacant apartment at a public housing complex in North Portland, five fidgety youngsters sit on pillows for a dramatic reading of Bear's Busy Family.

With the help of a volunteer, they see the fish that Bear's uncle caught, the plums his sister picked and the bowls his grandpa makes.

This small slice of preschool fantasy is part of the Housing Authority of Portland's early literacy program, a 19-month-old project that seeks to foster a love of books, boost vocabulary skills and teach youngsters to follow instructions.

Four days a week, they gather in what is now a community center at the St. Johns Woods apartments — as well as two other Housing Authority sites — for stories, snacks and activities. Parents are required to accompany them.

The volunteers also visit children in other public housing developments with books

for story time once a week.

The \$150,000-a-year program is funded by the state, the Housing Authority and the Children's Investment Fund, and is staffed by AmeriCorps volunteers.

Chad Sprangel, a volunteer who's been part of the program since last fall, says he's seen the kids who come regularly relate

better to other children and improve in following directions.

"I was a bit skeptical about it," he says. "But how that I've been here with some of these kids, I've seen amazing results."

Surveys have also shown that parents who participate spend more time playing, reading and talking with their children, said Michael Buonocore, the youth

programs administrator for the Housing Authority.

Shiega Bedaso spent a recent Friday with her 4-year-old twins listening to the stories. They were so happy when she told them where they were going, they got dressed themselves.

"Usually," she says, "it's really hard to get them dressed."

Got a story idea for North/Northeast? 503-294-7663; [stevebeaven@news.oregonian.com](mailto:stevebeaven@news.oregonian.com)

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Last month, the Vanport Square project on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard met another stumbling block when its primary tenant and investor Vesta Corp. announced it was going elsewhere. After more than four years, developers Ray Leary and Jeana Woolley are back to trolling for business with a July 15 deadline. So what's next for the once vibrant commercial center now turned eyesore? "We're trying to figure that out ourselves," says Bernie Kerosky, project manager for the Portland Development Commission. But many Northeast residents are tired, downright exhausted from waiting. "There's nothing new on MLK since 1999," says Fred Stewart, Northeast Portland resident for 29 years. "How come the PDC with all these educated and highly paid people can't get something going? Vanport could just never happen. I'm 40 now, and I would love to see it before I'm 80." The project's next advisory meeting is 6 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at 4134 N. Vancouver Ave.

AMY HSUAN