

GRANTEES IN ACTION

Reading Partners



BEFORE JASON READS, YOU HAVE TO READ JASON

When Jason Frias entered Sable Elementary School in Aurora, Colorado in November 2012, he seemed like a good fit for Reading Partners. Although he had strong conversational skills for a 9-year-old, he was reading at kindergarten level and his test scores were poor. He was neglecting to turn in his homework and often seemed tired and disengaged. A sweet, handsome boy, he was full of unrealized promise.

Jason failed to respond to the first two volunteer tutors assigned to him. Both women had experienced great success mentoring other students, but they could barely get Jason to do anything more than rest his head on the desk and fall asleep. Meanwhile, several of Jason's peers in Christa Burson's third grade class were making significant progress in Reading Partners.

Lisa Waters, Reading Partners Site Coordinator at Sable Elementary, knew that Jason was at risk; children who don't read proficiently by fourth grade — approximately 66 percent of public school students in 2011 — are four times less likely to graduate high school on time. She also knew that if Jason responded to the tutoring, his reading skills would improve along the lines of the Reading Partners average of 1.6 months for every month in the program. An evidence-based protocol mandates the collection of classroom teacher feedback three times throughout the year, enabling the Reading Partners staff to benchmark reading levels at enrollment, modify instruction along the way, and report gains at the end of the year.

Waters decided to play a hunch. Suspecting that Jason would respond better to a male tutor, she turned to Deric Pinales, a 24-year-old Iraq war veteran who had recently volunteered with Reading Partners.

The life story of Deric Pinales is told in the tattoos that cover his arms. There's the image of machinery, representing the inner engines that keep him going despite very hard times.



JASON MET DERIC FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY IN FEBRUARY 2013. DERIC KNEW INSTINCTIVELY THAT WHAT THE BOY NEEDED WAS ONE-ON-ONE ATTENTION.

There's the soldier with wings who is his guardian angel. Down toward his wrists are the symbols for his Army buddies who died in combat: the large "P" for Gary Pilardi from Pittsburgh; the medical symbol for company medic Donald ("Doc") Fox; and the beating heart for Chris Fox, who died in Deric's arms from a sniper's bullet, but who will always live on through him. Finally, there are the images representing the demons Deric has faced due to the PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) he's suffered since returning home from war. The scrolls on his left arm symbolize the demons he's conquered; the scrolls on the right, those he's still fighting.

Deric retired with full disability benefits in 2011 due to PTSD. Although he had no need for extra income, he knew he had to keep himself busy in order to avoid the flashbacks, nightmares and anxiety that came with his disorder. He tried working as a security guard, but fighting terrorists to making sure drunk people didn't act stupid," he says. "I realized that if I couldn't help defend my country, I needed to find other ways to give back."

When Deric came upon the Craigslist ad for Reading Partners, it called out to him right away. The children of Iraq had been important to him and he had asked his mother in Arkansas to send him gift items to distribute. "I saw kids who had absolutely nothing, and they'd be thrilled if I gave them a Sponge Bob pencil," he says. "A lot of them hadn't been to school in years because they had to work to provide for their families, and some could barely read. It broke my heart, because that's no way for any kid to grow up."

Deric met Lisa Waters when he first came to Sable Elementary for his Reading Partners "shadow session," where new volunteers are trained. When he kept calling her "ma'am," she told him to call her Lisa because "ma'am" made her feel too old.

Jason met Deric for the first time in the school library in February 2013. Deric knew instinctively that what the boy needed was one-on-one attention — someone who could listen to him and really hear him. It wasn't time yet to start a reading lesson. They told each other about their interests, comparing PlayStation to Xbox, and baseball to soccer.

From across the room, Lisa Waters looked on hopefully. Jason was alert and on the edge of his seat, something she'd never seen with his previous tutors. When the session was over, Jason stopped by Lisa's desk long enough to say: "Thanks for giving me the army man with the tattoos. He's cool."

The second Reading Partners session between Deric and Jason set the pattern for all that followed. First, Deric and Jason tell each other about the video games they've played since their last visit together. Second, Deric reads to Jason from a book of the child's choice, stopping whenever the boy seems confused about a word or a topic. Then, perhaps Jason will read aloud, too. "I'll point to a comma, and I'll say, 'That means you have to pause and then continue,'" Deric says.

From there, Jason and Deric turn to one of over 150 sequential Reading Partners lesson plans, Jason was on Level 16 when the two began working together. "We may spend more than one day on a lesson if Jason's struggling with it," Deric says. Deric often uses flash cards to focus on a particular phonics or decoding skill. Jason also responds well to "word net" exercises, where the mentor writes a problem word on a piece of paper, the student reads it back and then writes the word him or herself.



WITHIN A MONTH AFTER JASON BEGAN MEETING WITH DERIC, HE NOT ONLY BEGAN HANDING IN HOMEWORK, HE STOPPED FALLING ASLEEP IN CLASS AND STARTED BRINGING HIS BACKPACK TO SCHOOL EVERY DAY.

“We take it day by day,” Deric says. “I don’t want to set up any long-term goals because I don’t want Jason to fail, so we just do short-term goals he can achieve — like let’s move two places next week.” Whenever Jason begins to lag, Deric pulls out a stick of what he refers to as “energy gum.” At the end of every session, Deric always includes a game of Hangman using the letters of a difficult word from that day. He also makes certain to include constant positive reinforcement. “I give Jason credit all the time,” Deric says. “The kid works so hard and he doesn’t realize how good he is.”

The bond between the two Reading Partners has been strengthened by similarities in their histories. When Deric was three years old, he woke up one Sunday morning to get ready for church and found that his father had left home the night before and wasn’t coming back. Likewise, Jason was just two when his father married a woman who didn’t want him around. Three years went by before Jason’s father divorced, reentering the boy’s life. But it wasn’t long before he married again.

“There are so many kids out there without adequate father figures who are falling through the cracks,” Deric says. “They need somebody — not on their age level — who can point out right from wrong.”

Within a month after Jason began meeting with Deric, he not only began handing in homework, he stopped falling asleep in class and started bringing his backpack to school every day. He even turned in weekly book reports on a voluntary basis and prodded teacher Christa Burson for more books to read. “Certainly, there are a lot of tutors out there much better than I am,” Deric says modestly. “I just try my hardest, and then Jason tries his hardest ... and things happen.”

“Their relationship is just normal,” Waters says. “That’s what Jason needed. He needed normalcy in his life. You can see it in the way he looks at Deric. It’s all easy, it’s not forced. It’s so much more than just about reading.”

“I love this kid because I see him as a younger version of myself,” says Deric. “I wasn’t the biggest fan of reading back then, but I am now.” According to Burson, Jason was beyond excited when the two Reading Partners went to a Colorado Rockies baseball game using donated tickets. The boy was thrilled to sit in the stands with Deric and enjoyed the hot dog and soda the mentor bought him.

By the end of the 2012–13 school year, Jason’s reading had advanced two full grade levels, and it was very clear that both student and mentor had benefitted greatly from the program. “Deric is constantly thanking me for giving him the opportunity for working with Reading Partners,” says Lisa Waters, who is hoping the veteran will take more children under his wing next year. “I have a lot more troubled boys who can use him. You just never know what one interaction like this can do to change a life.”

Not surprisingly, Jason has altered his long-term goals. Instead of becoming a janitor like his father, he now hopes to be a soldier. “If you want to be in the military, you’ll have to know how to read,” Deric reminds him, but then continues: “The great thing is that when you learn how to read, you have a choice. You can do anything. All you have to do is put your mind to it and work at it every day.”