

# Americorp VISTA volunteers

**A**meriCorps recognizes that poverty, in many cases, is a generational condition, and VISTAs (Volunteers in Service to America) like me seek to find ways to help individuals and families break that cycle, creating and maintaining programs designed to last after our terms of service are complete.

My work here with Bright Futures for Early Childhood and Families focuses on early childhood literacy programming, giving me opportunities to work both directly with preschool-aged children and to provide behind-the-scenes assistance to a number of programs throughout the area.

As a VISTA volunteer, I am able to give back to the community in a way that encourages and empowers young children to help break the poverty cycle, promoting their early childhood literacy skills through a variety of fun programs designed not just to help children learn how to read, but to foster in them a lifelong love of reading and learning.

I visit several different preschools throughout the week for story time, and we typically sing songs, read stories and do a literacy-related craft or activity together.

With the help of Deb D'Angelo at the Wilkinson Public Library, I was able to create a group in Naturita based on her Reading Buddies program. Big Buddies read with their Little Buddies for 20-30 minutes. Then, they all come together to play a literacy-based game.

Another free program I was able to create is called "The StoryWalk® Project," created by

Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, VT and developed in collaboration with the Vermont Bicycle & Pedestrian Coalition and the Kellogg Hubbard Library. Bright Futures bought three new copies of "If You Give a Moose a Muffin," and I then mounted the pages on colorful poster board and displayed them at the preschool in Naturita.



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I've also been working with Nikki McCluer, director at Prime Time Early Learning Center, to create a reading challenge for children in Norwood and the surrounding communities. One of the greatest challenges in the fight against poverty and childhood illiteracy is getting books into children's homes, so we decided the best reward to offer children would be free books.

Through a generous donation from Bright Futures, we were able to purchase over 200 brand new high-quality books to give away as prizes. Children ages birth through eight read books in order to "climb" the challenge mountain that they helped create, a replica of Lone Cone Mountain and earn a free book for every 25 books they read. We just rolled out the challenge a few weeks ago and have already had several children earn free books.

Behind the scenes, I have had the privilege of working closely with Cathy James, Director of Bright Futures, in researching and compiling information for several grants, including one for an OAE (Otoacoustic Emission) machine for which Bright Futures was applying on behalf of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program.

Hearing health can be direct-

ly linked to the development of both language and literacy, and the OAE machine enables potential problems to be identified and addressed at an earlier age than previous screening methods.

Earlier this year, I participated in the AmeriCorps Colorado Reads Book Drive, and collected over 350 books to donate to early childhood care providers throughout the region.

More recently, I completed a project called Make it and Take it for the PAT parent educators. Each kit contains a free copy of "My Many Colored Days" by Dr. Seuss and a complete set of materials to create several long-lasting crafts. The activities can be used by children of all ages, and include projects such as a Color Feelings Wheel, where children and parents work together to identify the child's feelings with different colors.

I'm excited to say I've also been asked to work on the 2014-2015 School Readiness Calendar. I'll be adding new books, activities and information parents can use to help their children with literacy and school readiness skills.

Additionally, we'll be running a contest for artwork submissions from local children for the calendar through the end of April, with the 12 winners receiving a free book each. Flyers will be available to pick up from the libraries in Telluride, Norwood and Naturita.

Working with Bright Futures has given me an opportunity to gain a unique perspective on Norwood and the surrounding communities. Each town has its own personality and way of life, but poverty can be found in each and every one. As an AmeriCorps VISTA, I am finding ways to fight childhood literacy, creating sustainable programs designed to help break the cycle of poverty.