

# Newton-based picture book program promotes anti-racist values

By **Chika Okoye** Boston University journalist, Updated December 8, 2021, 3:35 p.m.



Story Starters, a nonprofit based in Newton, held an event in January 2020 in the War Memorial of Newton City Hall. ELLIE AXE

Story Starters, a nonprofit based in Newton, held a fifth kickoff event on Oct. 3. for a program providing families with picture books that help promote anti-racist values.

Ellie Axe, current director of the program, said research shows parents who are open with their children about their beliefs can support them in understanding race and help

disrupt racial bias at an early age.

She said it is important for parents to shift away from “color-blind parenting.”

“That’s harmful to kids,” Axe said. “We need to be supporting our kids in building the competencies to understand differences.”

The program, which is held virtually via Zoom, provides families with a bundle of books, guided prompts, and family activities to help parents start and deepen family race conversations. Axe took over the project from founder Joslyne Decker, who created Story Starters in 2017 after starting a similar program at her daughter’s school.

“She was noticing that classrooms were having conversations and building competency about anti-bias work, but that parents needed more support,” Axe said.

At the kickoff event, Grace Lin, a Taiwanese American children’s writer and illustrator, read her book “A Big Mooncake for Little Star” aloud to a crowded Zoom room.

Susan Paley, vice president of community relations at The Village Bank and a longtime Newton resident, said as a sponsor of the program, the bank donates money “so that the families don’t have to purchase the books.”

“The messages of the books that Ellie and her folks choose, they’re designed to kind of build harmony,” Paley said.

“I look at it as a real win-win for the community because of the fact that we’re not only contributing to early literacy, but we’re also contributing to making our community kinder and more respectful,” Paley said.

Anthony Deighton, a father of 7-year-old twins, said he enrolled both of his daughters in the program in the summer of 2020.

“The program, in a sense, is very disarming because it uses a very calm, comfortable

construct — reading books — to approach a very difficult topic,” he said. “It begins a

dialogue that moves minds and changes minds and educates people in a way that is very powerful.”

During the summer of 2020 and in the wake of the [murder](#) of George Floyd, Axe said Story Starters saw an increase in families enrolling in the program.

“Within two weeks, we had 97 families enrolled from 14 states,” Axe said.

Melanie Conroy, a Newton resident, enrolled her 7-year-old daughter in the program in January 2020 and has enrolled her youngest daughter into the current fall 2021 cohort.

Conroy said Story Starters, along with having a diverse bookshelf, gave her children the tools to understand their differences outside of their school curriculum, where she said they had only read African American stories told from a historical point of view.

“I was noticing at home a lot of our conversations were framed around saying things like, ‘Oh wow, I would have had to ride on the back of the bus’ or things like that,” she said.

Conroy said it is important for her kids to not just see themselves as “part of a broader historical lesson, but as individuals with their own stories to tell.”

“It’s so critical that they see themselves as protagonists, as worthy of having their story told and their story shared, and their story celebrated by a group of people, not just themselves,” Conroy said.

For families interested in learning more, Story Starters’ Winter 2022 program begins virtually Jan. 30 at 4 p.m. The featured speakers are expected to include New York Times best-selling author Grace Lin and Dr. Howard Stevenson, the executive director of the Racial Empowerment Collaborative, a center helping to promote racial literacy in schools and neighborhoods.

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