

“Morphing” PRIME TIME, a Successful Family Literacy Model

Overview and Brief History of PRIME TIME

In Greek mythology, when a vision is needed for an answer to a very tricky problem, Morpheus, the God of Dreams, is enlisted to create the appropriate visionary solution.¹ Perhaps, it was Morpheus, then, who has, over the years, offered the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) solutions to various intergenerational literacy problems in Louisiana. These problems have been addressed quite successfully through PRIME TIME Family Reading Time®, LEH’s award-winning family literacy model that generally targets both six through ten-year-olds with reading problems and their parents. Due to our documented success, PRIME TIME has been awarded: the Public Library Association’s 2003 Advancement of Literacy Award, the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities’ Coming Up Taller Award in 2000, and the Federation of State Humanities Councils’ Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize. Through these “visions” of new avenues for this literacy program, PRIME TIME has proved itself to be an extremely adaptable program—one which can truly “morph” itself into many forms, offering solutions to low literacy and illiteracy both in Louisiana and throughout the nation.

In the Summer 2000 issue of *Louisiana Libraries*, an article “Louisiana Libraries Take the Lead in National Family Literacy” appeared, outlining the focus of PRIME TIME at that time. That article gives not only historical information about PRIME TIME, but also summarizes the format of the programs and statistics from early programs. At that time, however, the PRIME TIME programs were implementing the original model, but during the past seven years, it has been adapted to meet changing needs into many forms. Although PRIME TIME’s humanities-based programs are still mainly implemented through public libraries or schools, these programs have been modified in many ways to meet the needs of various populations. In 2007, LEH is offering, along with the traditional PRIME TIME programs, the following adaptations that have morphed over the past years: bilingual PRIME TIME programs, a PRIME TIME pilot addressing truancy problems through the District Attorney’s office in Lincoln Parish, a PRIME TIME targeting a middle school in Shreveport, a PRIME TIME addressing literacy needs at a FEMA trailer court, and a PRIME TIME at a New Orleans museum.

Perhaps in 1990 Morpheus tapped Dr. Michael Sartisky, President/Executive Director of the LEH, on the shoulder, giving him a vision to throw LEH’s support behind the first statewide literacy conference. 1990 is the year that there was a historic meeting of our nation’s governors, who established goals that were to guide the U.S. into the twenty-first century. One of these was “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate.”² Obviously, we still have not fully realized that goal, but through programs such as PRIME TIME, we are making gains yearly, and the 1990 literacy conference in Louisiana was most certainly part of this important literacy thrust. After analyzing the outcomes of this conference, Dr. Sartisky and Dr. Kathryn Metelka, then LEH Deputy Director, were inspired to design a family literacy model with a humanities base. The East Baton Rouge Parish Library, which, along with Dr. Robert Becker of LSU, helped initiate the program in Baton Rouge, with children’s librarian Dianne Brady’s going on to direct the program for the next decade. The pilot program was held at the Goodwood Library and served over thirty-five families.³ The model was transformed during the

next few years, leading to the institutionalization of the components present today after five years of copious field-testing to insure the targeted goals. Since that 1991 pilot, 374 PRIME TIME programs in Louisiana and 258 outside the state have been implemented, reaching approximately 24,000 people in 36 states and the Virgin Islands.⁴

From the beginning, PRIME TIME programs were an outreach model (targeting at-risk, low-literacy families) with a humanities-based syllabus, which is designed to reinforce the role of the family, to bond families around the act of reading and discussing books, and to help families use libraries in order to become life-long learners. These goals and the basic format of PRIME TIME remain unchanged.

Today most PRIME TIME programs run for six to eight weeks and target low-income, low-literacy children between the ages of six and ten and their families. In every program, an LEH-trained storyteller tells or reads dramatically one to three award-winning children's books, and an LEH-trained scholar / discussion leader, who typically holds a Ph.D. in the humanities or teaches at a university with a master's degree, leads the children and their parents or guardians in a humanities-based discussion about the book or books. A library commercial is included each week, presenting these families, many of whom rarely if ever visit libraries, with ideas about the various services that they can receive in their libraries. In order to eliminate potential barriers and to draw these families to these programs, there are also healthful snacks or meals, door prizes, pre-reading activities for siblings who are two to five, and free transportation to and from the program where needed.

During the past decade, Morpheus seems to continue to visit the LEH, allowing PRIME TIME's successful formula to benefit many special populations from the New Orleans housing evacuees at a FEMA trailer court to an intervention program for young truants in Lincoln Parish.

The Growth of PRIME TIME Family Reading Time, Inc.® in Enrollment and Budget

PRIME TIME currently has a staff of five and an advisory board of twelve individuals, representing six states. The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) continues to serve as the organization manager/fiscal agent. For more than thirty-five years, the LEH has provided lifelong learning opportunities available to citizens of Louisiana regardless of race, gender, age, economic status, level of educational attainment, ethnicity, or even location. Today the LEH stands as an integral part of Louisiana's cultural economy and its education system with an annual budget of nearly \$4 million and a staff of seventeen. PRIME TIME incorporated as a separate 501 (c) (3) in 2004, changing the program name to PRIME TIME Family Reading, Inc. to assist affiliate sites and partnering states in leveraging funding for program sustainability.⁵

PRIME TIME was designed to reach what was, at that time, a new population for the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities—those who have little previous experience with libraries and little success with reading. PRIME TIME is one of the few, if not the only, NEH projects that reach an audience who rarely participates in traditional humanities programs predicated on literacy, namely minority and ethnic families with low income and low levels of literacy.

Having acted as a primary financial supporter for pilot sites within Louisiana and across the United States since 1991, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has played a critical role in PRIME TIME's national expansion. After field-testing

PRIME TIME from 1991 until 1994, the LEH secured NEH grants to implement the program throughout Louisiana. NEH funding then helped leverage subsequent state support, which is now the principal source for Louisiana sites. Louisiana has a special need for literacy programs since it ranks at or near the bottom of almost every national assessment of education. A second NEH award in 1997 initiated this regional expansion in cooperation with neighboring state humanities councils. The NEH awarded a grant in 1999 to PRIME TIME for national expansion in partnership with the American Library Association. Libraries from across the county applied, but only fourteen could be funded. Based on this immense interest, PRIME TIME applied for and received funding from the NEH for an additional fourteen sites in 2000. To support more fully PRIME TIME's efforts to expand and sustain programming nationally, the NEH awarded subsequent funds in 2001 (thirteen sites), 2003 (twenty sites), 2005 (twenty sites), and 2007 (eighteen sites). The NEH awards have totaled over \$1,900,000.⁵

According to Faye Flanagan, Director of PRIME TIME, the Endowment's present partnership with the American Library Association, with its national network of member libraries is instrumental in insuring our humanities-based literacy program will reach a much larger audience than it would otherwise.

Success and Growth of PRIME TIME's Bilingual Element

Since 2000 when PRIME TIME's national expansion began in earnest, librarians from other states with demographics different from those of Louisiana noted in their reports to PRIME TIME the lack of bilingual selections in the syllabi. Louisiana had not recorded a large influx of Latino populations at that time, and, therefore, had not incorporated Spanish materials into the offerings. Understandably, librarians from Texas, Florida, and California expressed the need for these materials. However, when the Nebraska Humanities Council announced to the LEH that it wanted to fund only bilingual (Spanish/English) programs, and the Kentucky Humanities Council identified the need for Spanish selections in Lexington, the immediacy and breadth of the need became more evident.

The United States is the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world,⁶ but unfortunately many of the Latino families, the largest minority in the U.S.,⁷ live in poverty.⁸ The LEH program staff recognized that their existing perception of the PRIME TIME target audience had to be enlarged.

Fortunately, Dana Eness, PRIME TIME Associate Director at that time, had an educational background that included Spanish and Latin American studies and had taught in Spain. The incorporation of Spanish books and bilingual selections into the existing PRIME TIME syllabi became a high priority to meet the needs of the affiliate states. The LEH established focus groups in California and Nebraska that included those who had attended PRIME TIME programs. Also, in consultation with PRIME TIME evaluator, Linda Langley, Ph.D., Eness developed a survey to administer to PRIME TIME team members in Kentucky, California, and Nebraska. Today, the LEH offers three bilingual syllabi, which are based on pre-existing PRIME TIME syllabi. Discussion Guides were developed by Robert Becker, Ph.D. of Utah, formerly a professor of history at LSU and charter developer of PRIME TIME.

According to PRIME TIME Project Director Faye Flanagan, four bilingual programs have been piloted in Louisiana, and two more are being implemented in Fall 2007. The programs have ranged from the highly successful site in Ascension Parish at the Gonzales

Library to an amazingly seamless program held at Broadmoor Branch Library in Shreveport. Most recently, the International School of Louisiana in New Orleans implemented one bilingual program and immediately applied for a second. St. Tammany Parish has now requested one as well.

PRIME TIME's Connection with India through Katrina-affected Families

In a desire to lend a helping hand to New Orleans in November 2005 after Katrina's destruction, Mary Ellen Gerber, founder of the Mary Ellen Gerber Foundation, came to the LEH and offered a \$2000 grant to PRIME TIME. These funds were specifically tied to a program that would touch the lives of children who had suffered during Katrina. (The LEH applied matching funds to the eight-week program.) Gerber also requested that during the program, PRIME TIME children write letters to the children in Puri Village, India, who survived the Tsunami of 2004 and are now being cared for by the Mary Ellen Gerber Foundation. Miranda Restovic, Assistant Director of PRIME TIME, closely supervised the activities of this PRIME TIME due to the many new challenges it presented: Piloting a writing component to this program and targeting families displaced by a hurricane. According to Restovic, "During this particular program, with the effects of Hurricane Katrina still fresh and ever so present in the residents' everyday lives, the process of writing added a healing measure to the PRIME TIME experience."

Since large numbers of evacuees are now housed in Renaissance Village in Baker, Louisiana, the LEH staff brought together a team to implement a PRIME TIME program there from September 19 to November 6, 2006. According to the final reports of that site, the total attendance of the 8 sessions was 235, with an average weekly attendance of 29. The program was coordinated by the Baker Branch of the East Baton Rouge Parish Library in partnership with For All Kids Foundation and Renaissance Village. One of the goals of PRIME TIME is to help families relate lessons of literature to their own lives. The letter-writing component was a valuable extension to the existing model, as it allowed the children and their families to solidify their stories and feelings, particularly in respect to Hurricane Katrina and the dramatic changes in their lives thereafter, on paper and share them with others. One thirteen-year-old participant wrote, "I was scared [during the evacuation] because I thought I was never going to see my family again. I wasn't with my mom or dad. I was with my aunt, but she took good care of me." Another young participant wrote, "People have been giving me things, and I am grateful."

As with all PRIME TIME families, these learned about the many services that libraries provide. Hopefully, they will be able to return to New Orleans and continue taking advantage of library materials and services. By the last session, final drafts of letters were produced and a package of these letters was sent to India along with pictures taken during the program. Letters from the children in India arrived at the LEH headquarters in July and will be forwarded, if possible, to the children to whom they were written. Due to the success of this program and the generosity of the people of Baker, a second program will take place at Renaissance Village this fall.

Shreveport's Bethune Middle Academy To Host Two Eight-week PRIME TIME Programs during 2007-8

The LEH is planning two eight-week pilot PRIME TIME programs and teacher training for Bethune faculty during the 2007-8 school year. The program will be used to

address two major weaknesses found in schools with low academic performance: students reading below grade level and parents not being involved positively with the school. The goal is to involve fifty seventh graders and their parents and siblings during this time. According to Dr. Perry Daniel, principal of Bethune, “At Bethune Middle Academy we realize the impact that our parents have on their children's success. Our expectations for this program are to increase parental involvement in the educational process and to increase the appreciation and love for reading in the Bethune community.”

Additionally, the LEH will utilize a systemic approach and provide teacher in-service for faculty members interested in replicating PRIME TIME strategies in their middle school classes. The chapter book *Seed Folks*, along with twenty-one children’s books from a PRIME TIME syllabus entitled “Journeys,” will be used with the families to create humanities-based discussions.

Having long been frustrated by not having the legal status to access educational records in order to track long-term effects, the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities is especially pleased that, for the first time, a school can compare and contrast academic records of those students who are participating in the PRIME TIME Program with those who are not. LEH will also be able to see if the PRIME TIME students increase their use of the library after this program ends and whether or not the students participating in this program have the same number, fewer, or more discipline problems than the other students there and than these PRIME TIME students have had in the past, etc. Since, historically, PRIME TIME programs have been in libraries and other places that could not provide these kinds of statistics, this factor is extremely important. LEH statistics in the past have primarily relied on the surveys (pre and post) that the PRIME TIME families complete, as well as information, much of which is anecdotal, from the reports submitted by PRIME TIME program coordinators, storytellers, scholars, and pre-school coordinators.

PRIME TIME To Pilot Programs Involving Truant Children in Lincoln Parish

Many District Attorney Offices are experiencing an increase in the number of truant referrals that they are receiving from schools (children in K-5th grades).⁸ Therefore, the juvenile justice system is increasingly serving as the final stop for truants and as a mechanism for intervening. Beginning this fall, the Lincoln Parish District Attorney’s Office under the leadership of Robert (Bob) Levy, who is working with PRIME TIME Senior Consultant Dianne Brady, will provide funding and partner with the Lincoln Parish Library to offer PRIME TIME on an ongoing basis (spring and fall of each year) as part of their intervention process for families with truant children. The District Attorney’s Office will strongly encourage families with truant children who are among LEH’s target audience to attend PRIME TIME, which will, in turn, help the library coordinator identify families for recruitment. With a successful pilot in Lincoln Parish, LEH plans to expand PRIME TIME to other District Attorneys’ Offices in Louisiana (and other states) that are interested in alternative intervention programs.

Obviously, truancy, if left unaddressed during the preteen years, can have incredibly negative effects on the student, families, schools, and society. PRIME TIME, centered on families’ reading and talking about books together, offers strategies for problem-solving, decision-making, awareness of responsibilities, and consequences of actions through humanities-based discussions of children’s literature.

An After-School PRIME TIME Program Scheduled at the Ogden Museum

While attending a meeting for after-school program providers, PRIME TIME's Miranda Restovic met Kate Barron, the educational coordinator for the Ogden. When Barron asked for others at the meeting to partner with the Ogden Museum, Restovic immediately sensed that the Ogden would be a perfect venue for PRIME TIME. PRIME TIME has worked in libraries, schools, churches, community centers, and FEMA trailer parks, so why not a museum? Following a few brainstorming meetings between LEH staff and the Ogden staff, they decided that the best way to connect PRIME TIME and the museum's own educational mission was to extend the program to eight weeks with the last two weeks' being dedicated to an arts and crafts project developed by the museum staff on the illustrations of children's books. The program is now slated to begin Tuesday, September 11 and run until October 30. Connecting with the arts and crafts element seemed a natural direction for the project to go in, as the Ogden is hosting a collection of Bennie Andrews art and the Ogden's bookstore carries several of Benny Andrews' illustrated children's books. One of these titles will be incorporated in the program at the Ogden during the first session to introduce the participants to children's literature as well as the world of illustration and Benny Andrews. The Ogden will recruit families from neighboring schools, targeting low-literacy families from Little Shepherd, John Dibert and other faith-based and public institutions. A representative from the New Orleans Public Libraries will be made available to each session to introduce the participants to library resources and updates on New Orleans Public Library recovery.

Conclusion

From its beginning staff of one (Dianne Brady), the PRIME TIME staff has grown to five today: Faye Flanagan, Program Director; Dianne Brady, Senior Consultant; Associate Director, Olivia Pass, Ph.D.; and Assistant Directors, Shantrell Adams and Miranda Restovic. LEH President / Executive Director Michael Sartisky continues to participate in the innovations, leverage funding, and advance the expansion of the award-winning model. These LEH staff members are available to disseminate information about the developments and technical assistance during program implementation. What other forms the program may take in the future can be only conjecture at this time; however, undoubtedly, due to its success in the past, the "formula" of LEH's PRIME TIME program is one that can be replicated and adapted both easily and successfully to address the various needs of families in Louisiana and elsewhere. Thus, the LEH hopes that Louisiana's innovative librarians will be visited by Morpheus as well and come up with their own ways in which PRIME TIME might be once again "morphed" to help the at-risk, needy families in the various communities of our state.

The LEH and PRIME TIME websites can be found at www.leh.org. *Librarians who wish to schedule a PRIME TIME for their library in the Fall 2008, should contact Faye Flanagan, Director of PRIME TIME: Flanagan@leh.org; 800-909-7990, Ext. 127.*

End Notes

¹Holme, Bryan, compiler, *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Greek and Roman Fables Illustrated* (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 98-100.

²Irwin S. Kirsch et al., *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Educational Testing Service, 1993), xi.

³Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, *20th Annual Report to the People* (New Orleans, Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, 1991), 13.

⁴Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. *Prime Time Family Reading Time* (New Orleans: Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, 2007).

⁵Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. *Investment Impact for 35 Years*. (New Orleans, 2005), 5.

⁶Makoski, Chet. "A Package for North America Meeting the Challenge of Multilingual Requirements." *The Donaldson Group* <http://www.donaldsonmakoski.com/buzz/articles/pkg_multiling.shtml>.

⁷"Hispanics Now Largest U.S. Minority." *CBS News*, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/01/21/national/main537369.shtml>.

⁸Sherman, Arloc. "African-American and Latino Families Face High Rates of Hardships." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* < <http://www.cbpp.org/11-21-06pov.htm>.

⁹"Truancy." *Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center Online* 2006-7 <http://www.jrsa.org/jjec/programs/truancy/index/html>.

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