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NEW THIS ISSUE
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PAGE 6A

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PAGE 9A

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Conrad Hopes Mabry Reading Club will Grow

BY JED BLACKWELL
EDITOR

The Need to Read Book Club at Mabry Middle School has produced many avid young readers, and he garnered a great deal of attention and a prestigious award. Now, Conrad is hoping to get the program some exposure at the national level.

Conrad was on hand at Mabry on Thursday afternoon to present book club members with their new books, along with T-shirts and after-school snacks. She was also interviewing members about their book club experiences.

"I'm creating a video based on what we do," Conrad said. "Our members are so great, and I'd love to use what they're saying about the program to show the impact that it's having."

Conrad, who recently won the Prudential Spirit of the Community award, will travel to Washington, D.C. in May to compete for the national award. While there, she hopes to see South Carolina's con-

gressmen, and she wants to show the program to the National Association of Secondary School principals.

"My goal is to make this a national program," she said. "I want them to see what a difference this has made."

Conrad said she can see in the program's members that the club is paying off.

"I think it's created a love for books," she said. "The teachers who are involved with the club tell me that they're able to see a difference in the kids who are involved."

The community service aspect of the club is just as important as the reading aspect. Since its inception, the Club has distributed more than \$13,000 worth of books and grown to include six chapters. Some of these chapters are among kids who were once recipients of past service projects.

"Now these kids have a chance to experience the joy of giving instead of just knowing what it feels like to receive," Conrad said.

The club works by raising sponsors to donate a specific amount for each page read by the club.



Need To Read Book Club founder Emily Conrad videotapes an interview about the program with a Mabry Middle School teacher last week.

Last year, for example, the Mabry chapter of the program raised \$1,500 for books which club members picked out, purchased and presented to children at the Spartanburg Soup Kitchen.

"We had such a great time selecting the books for kids from birth to teens and discussing which ones we thought were the best, cutest, funniest, and so on," said club member

Mary Farmer. "Then, when we saw the reactions of the boys and girls as they chose their very own books, it was amazing. Getting the opportunity to see the children, read with them, and give them the books that they chose was so much fun and a great feeling"

Jessica Southerland agreed with her classmate.

"My favorite memory was

going to the soup kitchen to distribute books," she said. "While I was there, I got to read to a little girl and when I was through and handed her the book to keep, her face glowed with happiness. Seeing the smiles on children's faces when we gave them 'presents' was the best feeling in the world."

Jonnise Macomson said she'd like to see everyone become a member of the

club.

"The club is very unique as well as special," she said. "If I was to try and convince someone else to join, I would tell them to think of the children they'd be helping by opening up the world of books to them."

"I'd also show them the inspirational articles and videos of the NTRBC. Wow, that got me hooked! I cannot wait for the service project to take place. Helping out in my community and being a part of something positive for others is important to me. I look forward to giving back to my world what I love so much—the gift of reading."

Conrad thinks the success stories at Mabry can be duplicated across the state - and across the country.

"I believe that everyone in the community could benefit from the program," she said. "It's not just the reading, but the service learning concept as well. I think the program creates character, compassion, and confidence in all the members. The kids embody those qualities."