

Our view: Books — gateway to better future

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The possibilities for changing the world are endless — using less energy, recycling, bettering the condition of women across the world, feeding hungry children, providing medical care to the sick — as we said, endless. The needs can seem so daunting that even the most charitable person occasionally wants to give up and return to enjoying life in the First World.

But as a new year dawns, the volunteers, the do-gooders and those committed to change will continue to remake their world, one step, one action at a time. To all of those people — and boy, are we blessed in Santa Fe to have a bunch of them — we say thank you. From retirees who serve our community by reading to children or volunteering at museums, to young people who sing in retirement homes or pull weeds at their churches, this is a city that refuses to accept the status quo. In the famous words of the late Sen. Robert Kennedy, we would count Santa Fe and its citizens this way: “There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why. ... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?”

Among the many asking why not, on this first day of 2013, we would like to spotlight one particular group of young people. The difference they are seeking to make really will change the world. By putting books into the hands of children who don't have many — or any — Hooked on Books is refusing to accept that some children won't read, or can't read. Instead, the program's coordinators — Youth United — imagine children at the doctor's office or at the emergency room, seeing blue bookshelves and picking up a book. Once they open it, children learn that the adventures of Tom Sawyer or Captain Underpants or Anne of Green Gables are as engrossing as any video game. Their lives change forever. And changing lives, to the dreamers, is what advocacy and volunteering is all about.

Hooked on Books was started in 2011 as a project of students at the Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences. It is simple in both its premise and execution. Monthly reading contests in schools encourage more reading. In the community, blue bookshelves, full of books, placed in spots where children have to wait with their parents. The school project is now communitywide, with students from Capital High, Monte del Sol, the New Mexico School for the Arts, Santa Fe Prep and the Academy for Classics and the Technology taking part. Youth United even won the prestigious 2012 Global Call to Action Challenge, sponsored by the Pearson Foundation and PeaceJam, for its literacy campaign. One of the most compelling parts of the campaign — pay attention state lawmakers — was a free, two-week summer camp last year, run by school co-founder Rayna Dineen. After just two weeks at camp, participants improved their standardized reading scores by, on average, one grade level. That's a solution to lackluster reading scores that might work better and cost less than holding back thousands of third-graders, as advocated in one of Gov. Susana Martinez's proposed education reforms.

What stirred the kids at the Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences was learning that other kids in town couldn't read well — and that one reason was that many did not have books at home. The kids thought that wasn't fair. So they set out to change their corner of the world, with their parents and teachers supporting them all the way. Now, through Youth United and the broader group, The Alliance for Literacy, young people, businesses, schools, librarians and many others are working to make it easier for all children to get hooked on books. As the kids found out to their dismay, New Mexico ranks 48th in the nation in literacy. They didn't like that statistic, and one child at a time, they will make a difference.

Get hooked

• Visit www.nmallianceforliteracy.org to learn more about Hooked on Books.