

READING IS FUN NEWSLETTER

February 2026

Pioneer's Claudia Brown & her RIF connection

In December 2025, RIF was delighted to receive a \$5,000 contribution from Pioneer to the Literacy Match Challenge, the largest donation to the LMC. RIF was among several "Giving Tuesday recipients" selected by Pioneer's employee-led Grant Committee, which reviews "Pioneer with Purpose" nominations submitted by employees. To nominate an organization, employees must have a strong personal connection and direct involvement with the nonprofit. Reading is Fun (RIF) was nominated by **Claudia Brown, Pioneer's Schenectady Branch Manager and Business Development Officer, whose firsthand experience with RIF and its impact on childhood literacy led her to submit a nomination.**

The Pioneer Charitable Foundation was established in 2018 with a mission of "helping kids be kids" by supporting local charitable organizations that improve the lives and well-being of children in the communities it serves. Since its founding, the Foundation has contributed more than \$2 million to community-based nonprofits. The recent \$25,000 Giving Tuesday donation in 2025 is what led Pioneer to surpass this milestone. The Foundation primarily supports causes focused on children and families, including education, literacy, youth development, and programs that remove barriers to opportunity for kids in its local communities.

Claudia, you first met RIF when you attended Scrabble-Rama on behalf of Pioneer. What were your first impressions of RIF?

My first impression of the program was how thoughtfully it was designed around the needs of each child. From the beginning, it was clear that the focus wasn't just the mechanics of reading skills but on building confidence and a genuine love of learning. The folks at the Scrabble-Rama event were incredibly warm and created a welcoming & supportive environment, making it easy to feel connected.



RIF COO Mary Lou Russo, Executive Director AI Magid & Pioneer's Claudia Brown, at Dec 2025 "Giving Tuesday" event, presenting \$5,000 check to RIF.

Please tell us about your experience as a Reading Partner.

I decided to become a Reading Partner because I believe literacy is the foundation to a child's success, both academically and personally. It opens the doors to imagination, communication, and self-expression. My experience as a Reading Partner with my first grader at Paige Elementary School has been incredibly rewarding. Each session offered an opportunity to connect, encourage, and celebrate small wins. Watching my student become more comfortable, engaged, and confident over time was especially meaningful and reinforced how impactful one-on-one support can be. The experience had personal meaning for me as well. Seeing the student go through periods of frustration, disappointment, and then success reminds me that progress doesn't always happen immediately. The experience was also a powerful reminder of how much children benefit from having someone show up consistently and believe in them. During the moments when it was challenging for my student, where I knew, it was not going to happen today, I engaged the surroundings, using the posted signs in the hall to bring the story out of the book and into my student's reality. I hope he found it engaging, lol!

2026 Save the Date!
It's a Scrabble-Rama!

A Scrabble Competition to Benefit
 The Reading Is Fun (RIF) Program

- ◆ Teams of 2–4 people (ages 18 & up) compete
- ◆ Prizes awarded to top 3 teams
- ◆ Continental breakfast & raffle
- ◆ Registration opens March 1st

Saturday, April 25
9:00 am—Noon
Schenectady High School
Cafeteria

For Event Information, Registration, and Entry Fee:
<https://www.readingisfun.org/> - Call 518-388-8410

Scrabble-Rama is also looking for sponsors - Please email RIFoutreach@gmail.com if you are interested or have suggestions!

Schenectady Rotary Club hosts RIF

RIF's Events Coordinator Jan Gallas & Outreach Coordinator Sabrina Ricci were invited to speak at the Schenectady Rotary Club's January meeting. They appreciated the opportunity to share how RIF works in SCSD's elementary schools to promote literacy and the love of reading.

RIF learned that Schenectady Rotary Club is like-minded in their focus on promoting literacy in Schenectady. Since 2023, the Schenectady Rotary Club has been engaged with projects supporting Keane Elementary School, a Community School in the Schenectady City School District. We shared experiences and ideas about how to achieve our similar goals. The Rotary had lots of great questions, and RIF appreciates very much their interest and support. Thank you for the opportunity to meet and connect!

Please contact **Sabrina Ricci** with ideas or questions about the newsletter at RIFOutreach@gmail.com

Van Corlear Winter Carnival

In January, RIF Reading Partners Vicki Bremer & Martha Longo braved the cold and attended Van Corlear Elementary School's Winter Carnival, giving out books to students and their families. Great job ladies! Photos of the event below.



Volunteer Placement Update

RIF Volunteer Coordinator Valerie Rivera reports that as of February 6, 2026, **93 Reading Partners are working with 226 students.**

Welcome to our new Reading Partners:
Ellen Auerbach, Jim Brodie, Linda Gaida, and Nancy Mckiernan!

Do you love volunteering with RIF? Do you have family or friends who would like to join you? Please ask them to email Valerie Rivera at rifvolunteerplacements@gmail.com

Reading Partner Spotlight

Linda Knipper

Where do you volunteer? I am at Zoller Elementary School with second graders.

Why did you join RIF? I have been involved with RIF for about 8 years. When I was getting ready to retire from a very fast paced, people-centric job, I knew I needed to make plans for new activities in my retirement. I had worked for the NYS Tax Department for almost 40 years.

What are your best memories of working with RIF? My most treasured moments are when a former student sees me in the hall at Zoller or out in the community and runs up to me and gives me a hug. I think the connections we make with our students go way beyond just reading help, sometimes just having someone to talk to is what they need that day. I have had several students over the years that have shared their very difficult life situations with me and these stories stay with me.

What are your other interests? I am a very active community volunteer focused on food insecurity. I serve on the steering committee of the Schenectady County Food Council and am a very active volunteer with Schenectady StreetSoldiers and also volunteer at Bethesda House & City Mission. Also my hubby and I host a clothing and hygiene room during the Community Breakfast on Sundays at the First United Methodist Church. I sing in Rockvoices and also play lots of pickleball.

RSAC February Meeting

Ever wonder what to do if your student has trouble staying focused on their book? How about when they don't want to try reading with you? On Monday Feb 2, twenty Reading Partners met to discuss strategies to work with more challenging readers. The Reading Partners Support Group offered several ideas to help RPs redirect students. Hopefully the attendees went home with some helpful tips!

(Photos & summary from Deb Carey)



RIF's own Connie Clarke soon publishing her latest book

At the end of February 2026, Constance (Connie) Clarke, a RIF Reading Partner, is releasing her latest Clarke Fable, *The Fuzzy Bumblebee*. She said that, "In this book, children will learn the lesson of appreciating others for who they are. The fuzzy bumblebee comes to understand that he shares a sameness and a difference from those who are around him." Looking forward to reading it, Connie! Well done!

