

THE READING IS FUN PROGRAM NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2026



We did it! Literacy Match Challenges Exceeds Goal!

RIF is delighted to announce that the Literacy Match Challenge has met and exceeded the **\$30,000 match goal!** This means that, along with the \$30,000 matched by The Wright Family Foundation, the campaign raised \$60,000 to fund RIF's Spring Into Reading is Fun program in 2026, 2027 & 2028. **The total raised in the campaign was \$35,078, from September to December 2025.** The funds raised are comprised of 103 separate donations from individuals, local businesses, churches, clubs & other organizations. RIF will use excess funds raised for our other programs.

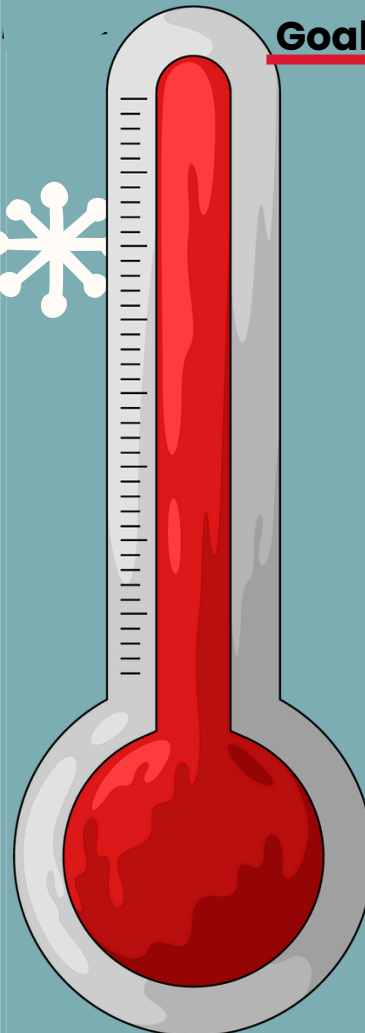
RIF's COO Mary Lou Russo said, "We are truly overwhelmed by the outpouring of generosity for the Literacy Match Campaign. Launching LMC as RIF's first broad fundraising effort, we didn't know what to expect, but the response has been incredibly heartening. Thanks to the support of RIF's Leadership Team, our Reading Partners, the community, and **The Wright Family Foundation**, we can continue the Spring Into Reading is Fun program for three more years. This means every Schenectady first grader will receive books to read throughout the summer. That's 2,400 students! Our goal is to spark a love of reading in each one."

Please see pages 3-4 to read the honor roll recognizing all of those who generously donated to support the campaign.

Total: \$35,078



Goal: \$30,000



RIF Selected in Mohawk Honda's "12 Days of Giving"

This December, **Mohawk Honda awarded RIF a \$5,000 donation as part of its annual "12 Days of Giving"**. RIF is very grateful to the Haradan Family and Mohawk Honda for this incredible gift. The generosity of local businesses like Mohawk Honda enables RIF to continue to create new programming. RIF congratulates all of the other wonderful charities nominated. In addition, we are grateful to the many supporters who voted for RIF in Facebook.

As part of this gift, RIF Outreach Coordinator Sabrina Ricci was a guest on **Mohawk Honda's weekly podcast "Table Talk"**. "What a fun experience to chat with Nate and Mike on "Table Talk". Thank you for giving me a chance to talk about RIF!" To watch the podcast, visit The Reading Is Fun Facebook page!



Times Union "Capital Region Gives"

On December 12th, RIF leadership attended the **"Capital Region Gives Celebration" hosted by George R. Hearst III, Times Union publisher and CEO**. RIF's representatives at the event included Founder and Executive Director Al Magid, Treasurer Larry Pierce, Library Coordinator & Board Secretary Mary Batzinger, and Outreach Coordinator and Fundraising Sabrina Ricci. RIF was honored among the Community Service Award winners, which were first announced in May 2025.

The RIF team enjoyed meeting many wonderful non-profit leaders in the Capital District. We are grateful to the Times Union for the opportunity to learn about all of the great initiatives and to spread the word about the impact of RIF's wonderful Reading Partners.



RIF'S LITERACY MATCH CHALLENGE

DONOR HONOR ROLL

Literacy Champions for Change

Pioneer Charitable Foundation

Literacy Visionaries

Anonymous (2)

Mary Batzinger

BBL Construction Services LLC

Marilyn J. Chase Family Trust

David Cheesman, In Memory of Halo Branton

First Reformed Church of Schenectady

First Reformed Church of Scotia

First United Methodist Church of Schenectady

Hershey Family Foundation-Community Foundation for the

Greater Capital Region

Alvin & Sally Magid

MVP Health Care

Rachel & John Roll

Literacy Leaders

Anonymous (8)
Jeanette Abbate
Michele Ricci-Bell
Fredrick Bremer-Bremer Forensic
Consultants PLLC
Vicki Bremer
Deb Carey
Ann Carman
Lynn Carman Bodden, In Memory of
Alice Iyer and In Honor of Raju Iyer
Shobha Chengalur-Smith
Doris Chow
Curtis Lumber
Christine DeLuke
Susanne & Robert Doyle
Nicki Foley
Jan Gallas
Daniel Gregory
Elizabeth Gregory
Gerald Hahn
Sharon Healey
John and Pixie Healy
Kevin and Suzin Healy
Rosaline Horowitz
Raju Iyer
Leslie Kaufman
Linda Knipper

Tina Lee
Meg Levine
Larry Lewis
Lord's Acre Fair Committee of
the Burnt Hills Methodist Church
Teresa Malizia
Sandra McIntyre
Sheila McMenamin
Jeffrey Murtagh
Niskayuna Reformed Church
Rebecca ODonnell
Margaret Pearson
Larry Pierce
Nancy Pierce
Kristen & Sean Quinn
Frances Ricci
Sabrina Ricci
Valerie Rivera
Mary Lou Russo
Schenectada Chapter NSDAR
Schenectady Federation of Teachers
Schenectady Ole Timers Baseball Club
Ricki D Shapiro
Mary Suminski
Carla Suna
Stephanie Warlik

Literacy Impact Makers

Anonymous (8)
Susan Burton
Rachel Cameron
Danielle Chapola
Constance Clarke
Bruce Connolly
Melinda Cramer
Colleen Doyle

Cynthia Farrell
Kathleen Greene
Lucinda Huggins
Lorma Kircher
Donna & David Lawrence
Martin & Maureen Lanahan
Cindy Ley
Deborah Malec

Elfriede Malin
Edward Martenis
Brenda Seckerson
Darlene Sharron
Patricia Terry
Mary Vawter
Maureen Wiedl



Volunteer Placement Update

Volunteer Coordinator Valerie Rivera reports that as of January 7th, 2026, **88 Reading Partners are working with 215 students.**

Welcome to our new Reading Partners!
Hannah Kapadia (Lincoln) and Carla Suna (Van Corlear)

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

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



Playing Games to Reinforce Reading Skills

On November 17th, Reading Partners came together to learn about the various games available at the RIF library. (See photos to the left.) Several volunteers from the Reading Advisory Committee discussed the reading concepts each game focused on. These included letter sounds, comprehension, rhyming, and CVC words (consonant/ vowel/consonant). The Committee also showed how games can be modified and adapted for individual students & answered questions from Reading Partners. The next Reading Partners support meeting is scheduled for Monday, January 26th, with more details on the topic and timing coming soon.



In December 2025, RIF was able to provide 400 new "bonus books" to Reading Partners working with second and third graders. The Reading Partners each distributed a set of books to the entire classes where they volunteer. Schenectady students received them before the holidays, thus providing reading material for the break. Second graders were given **Pig the Pug** and third graders received **Don't Open this Book**. See above our Reading Partners preparing books for gifting, & photos of a Yates 2nd grader class that received the books.



Reading Partner Spotlight

Judy Thorpe

Where do you volunteer? Woodlawn Elementary School with two first-grade students. In 2018, I began volunteering with Capital Region Jewish Coalition for Literacy program at Woodlawn Elementary. However, when this program changed to only include Albany schools, I happily learned about RIF through a friend.

Why did you join RIF? I always joked that the only thing I was good at was English, so it was no stretch that I became an Editor and then Technical Writer for my career after attending SUNY Albany. In between those positions, I was a tutor for the Guilderland Schools (elementary through high school students who were temporarily out of class for medical or other reasons), where I found the one-to-one teacher-student interaction to be beneficial to students who might otherwise be struggling. I saw how a few (honest) compliments went a long way for boosting self-confidence, which in turn also improved behavior/performance at times. I personally love reading (I've been in a wonderful book club with the same great ladies for 15+ yrs), and I see reading ability as the foundation of learning in school and life.

How do you make reading fun? I seek books with humor that the students might enjoy and authors who know what makes first graders laugh. To keep the students engaged, I vary activities (read, game, talk, draw a little). I try to assess where they "are" and if they're distracted, I bring them back with a question ("Did you see that little bird hiding there!"). The kids are always surprising me. A little girl I read with is so observant and curious and asks a lot of questions about the pictures and even asks why a word is "fancy" (noticing an italicized "is" in an Elephant and Piggie book). I explained it is a different type style to stand out, and we read it several times to show the emphasis.

What are your other interests? I have enjoyed playing tennis for many years (also played pickleball over 10 years ago, before it was a "thing!") and am an avid mahjongg enthusiast and play canasta. I keep active walking, bike riding, & exercising.

Volunteering with RIF has many "priceless" rewards! Recently a student from last year saw me in the hall reading with a new student and ran up to me with a big hug – it truly made my whole day!



Wanda Fisher

Where do you volunteer? At Van Corlear Elementary with first and second graders. (The first-grade teacher, Ms. Watson, interestingly enough, comes from my hometown of Weymouth, MA!) This is my ninth year with RIF, & I started at Lincoln Elementary.

How did you get involved with RIF? Both of my children are SCSD graduates, as are the two nieces whom I raised. My daughter taught English Language Arts in inner-city Boston for 17 years, with children. I started doing RIF in part to pay back Schenectady for the great education my children received (and some amazing teachers over the years), and because I believed that teachers don't always get credit for all they do. My own career was in journalism, public relations, & media.

How do you make reading fun? By getting to know them and finding out what kind of books they will enjoy reading. In my first year at Lincoln, I worked with a boy who loved LeBron James. He wanted to read a book that was way above his reading ability. I gathered a bunch of information about LeBron and asked him to repeat what I told him. I took notes and then had him write a "book" about LeBron James himself, using my notes. I printed it out & he read it to me. He was able to sound out the words on that instead of the chapter book he had originally wanted to read. Another child was not reading the words in a book but instead was making up his own words to stories, so I found books that had no words and allowed him to make up his own stories.

What are your hobbies? After retiring, I have written 3 novels and published several short stories. I also play and sing folk music, as well as try to keep up with new music for my radio show. Since 1982, I have hosted a folk music show on WAMC, which airs every Sat night between 8-10 pm. I am a baseball nut, a member of the Schenectady Ole Timers Baseball Club, an avid Red Sox fan (since I was eight years old!). I've been married to the same man since 1973 (we met at a Boston coffeehouse in 1966), and we have 7 grandchildren in Michigan & New Hampshire. I was inducted into the Folk Radio Hall of Fame, and in 2023, I became part of the Thomas Edison Hall of Fame for contributions to music in the Capital Region.