

A.H.A.V.A. holds Ma'aleh Adumim Read-a-thon

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Nonprofit dedicated to promoting English literacy among disadvantaged children in Israel launched 8th annual event.



A woman searches through books Photo: Ariel Jerozolinski

A.H.A.V.A., a nonprofit dedicated to promoting English literacy among disadvantaged children in Israel, launched its eighth annual English Read-a-thon earlier this month.

The Read-a-thon, which involves 18 elementary and middle schools in the Ma'aleh Adumim area this year, is an initiative aimed at helping children improve their English language skills by encouraging them to read the maximum amount of English books in five weeks.

Gaila Cohen-Morrison, an English teacher with some 30 years of experience in the field, founded A.H.A.V.A. – English Learned in a Natural Method back in 2000 after realizing that English is a crucial subject for children to learn in order to advance in the education system.

“In Israel you need a high level of English to get into college and a big part of secondary education is in English, so it’s very important,” she explained. “For many kids, the parents get a tutor, which helps a lot to improve – but a big chunk of the population, about half, can’t afford private lessons.”

A.H.A.V.A. offers an English literacy program for both native Hebrew and English-speaking children in Israel at an affordable cost. Lessons, conducted in small groups, are administered by educated teachers and are especially serving children in the periphery.

Cohen-Morrison told *The Jerusalem Post* that the Read-a-thon is not a contest, but more of a way to challenge kids to read as much as possible.

The children participating are divided by reading level and are sponsored by their parents for a minimum of NIS 20, which goes toward running A.H.A.V.A.’s Scholarship Fund. “Some kids look at it as an opportunity to raise money for a good cause, but most kids are much more excited about the prizes,” Cohen-Morrison said.

This year’s first place winners in the different categories will receive a Jeep ride for two; second place will earn a horseback riding session; third place will win bowling tickets and fourth place will enjoy a NIS 50 gift certificate to an English bookstore in the area. All participating children will also be awarded a book of their choice, at a party that will be held at the end of the five weeks.

“We’ve had some kids read some 100 books,” said Cohen-Morrison. “Kids who always had a fear of English suddenly are doing very well and reading a lot – we get a lot of these cases. Kids can go up one year in reading level after this.”

“I had a mother who kept asking me ‘Has it started yet?’ since November, she really wanted her daughter to participate. The kid started reading and she read 15 short books on the first day. Then, we gave her books that were more on her level, with 60-70 words a page. At first it took her 3 days to read a book and now, she finishes half of one in an evening,” she told the *Post*. “At the end of the day, you learn to read by reading.”

Every year, Cohen-Morrison adds “something special” to the Read-a-thon; this year, some of the couple of hundred kids participating have written letters to celebrities in English, asking them about their favorite childhood book.

Queen Elizabeth II has been the most popular address. Several letters were also sent to US President Barack Obama, rock singer Axl Rose and actor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Children also wrote to Israeli personalities including President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and singer Aviv Geffen.

The former captain and current assistant coach of Maccabi Tel Aviv basketball team, Derrick Sharp, recently answered Kfar Adumim pupil Ofek, writing: “Hi Ofek, your letter is very inspiring

and it brings me joy in your admiration of me. Continue to work hard and read as many books as you can. It's very important for your development! "My favorite book as a child was Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*, while later, around your age, it was [books about] Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. Ofek, I wish you all the best! Dream big! You can be whatever you want to be. Never stop believing!"

A reply also came in from Bayit Yehudi leader Naftali Bennett, who answered seven-year-old Shalhevet Rosenbaum from the Maaleh HaTorah School and told her that his favorite childhood book was *The Island on Bird Street* by Uri Orlev, which was set in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Nine-year-old Leeya Bitton of the Tomer Rachel School, meanwhile, received an answer from Ma'aleh Adumim Mayor Benny Kashriel, who wrote about *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.