West Haven businessman Andy Eder speaks on ‘engaging’ young readers

WEST HAVEN (April 6, 2012) – Eder Bros. owner Andy Eder recently came to the West Haven Community House to meet with pre-school, school, city and other service providers in the city to begin a discussion on how youngsters and their parents can be more fully engaged in reading.

Eder opened by saying that it was amazing what Dolly Parton has accomplished through her “Imagination Library” project, where upwards of nearly 700,000 books a month are distributed to pre-school children up to the age of 5. In 1996, Parton launched her *Imagination Library* to benefit the children of her home county in East Tennessee. Her “vision was to foster a love of reading among her county’s preschool children and their families by providing them with the gift of a specially selected book each month.”

Eder stated that his involvement in the pre-school reading movement began when he happened to be sitting next to a gentleman on a plane who wanted to replicate what Parton was doing, but instead targeting the Jewish community.

Afterward, when he began investigating the possibility of having a similar program in greater New Haven, Eder was told that there was no sponsor. “So I said, ‘I’ll do it …’” and currently the local effort is sending out up to 600 books a month in the greater New Haven area.

Eder then referenced the book by Diane Frankenstein, entitled, “Reading Together.” He noted that her method stresses “asking children questions about books read to them and waiting for the answer, “which are the most important things you can do when reading to a child.” And one doesn’t need to be literate to use this method, as using the technique with a picture book also proves to be “wonderful for the child,” Eder said.

Eder then introduced Heather Calabrese, a consultant and formerly of the UWGNH who has been working with Eder and meeting with potential partners to, 1. see what’s going on in the field of pre-school reading, and, 2. formulate strategies on how to proceed with a plan for expanding book resources to the pre-school population.

“So we are here,” Eder said, “1. to hear your ideas, and, 2. to tell you what we’re planning.”
Calabrese briefly addressed the gathering, saying, “It is a pleasure to work on this project.” She was quick to herald the work of Eder. “Andy could have said, ‘I’ll bring Ms. Frankenstein to New Haven,’ and left it at that.

“But he has taken it to another level,” she said, noting that through early April they have done 17 interviews, or “listening sessions,” with potential stakeholders including teachers and parent groups. “We have learned a great deal.”

“We asked everyone, ‘What’s already happening? And where and when are activities taking place?’” What they learned, she said, 1. More outreach is needed to parents and teachers, 2. parents are our top priority, 3. transportation and child care are issues.

“We reached out to a number of partners, including the teachers in Achievement First, and the public schools in New Haven. And thank you, Patty (Stevens, Exec. Director of WHCH), for putting together this group in West Haven.”

Eder noted that one of his business philosophies is “never do anything good without experiencing it yourself,” and “what got me excited” when he first heard Ms. Frankenstein speak was the prospect of having Diane “talk to Hispanic and African American audiences, and not just white faces.”

Calabrese added, “I found myself getting excited and fully engaged myself (when hearing Frankenstein present) when I just there to be an observer.” What she has come to realize upon reflection of the importance of reading to young children is “there is not a wrong way, but rather better ways.”

Eder said, “So I want to hear what’s really on your mind, but not what you think I want to hear.” And for any future presentation and participation is free, as “food, etc … I am providing.”

Viola Waldo, West Haven Community House’s Head Start’s Family Services Manager, said, “In the past eight years or so we have provided a monthly book distribution to children and families. Our teachers pick a book, use it in the classroom and then the children get to take the book home. We serve many poor families where book buying is not in the family budget … and we’ve had some good experiences.”

Waldo then described one little pre-school boy “whose book bag was so heavy he couldn’t even carry it because he refused to take the books out he was given because he cherished them so much.”
Eder noted that it is a recognized challenge in getting parents out to hear a presentation such as Frankenstein’s.

West Haven Asst. Supt. of Schools Dr. Anne Druzolowski said, “we’ve had good luck with transportation” … adding that “food is certainly an attraction. But it’s transportation that is the huge issue in our disadvantaged sections of the city, like Allingtown.”

She noted that there has been a tremendous increase in transportation costs and that the local bus company when instructed will go to all the local public transportation bus stops to pick up constituents.

She added that the philosophy of “training the parent with the child is important. Walking away with books – very powerful, and sometimes these books are all a child has – it’s their escape.”

She added that “grown people tell us of similar experiences” in their lives.

Druzolowski then asked Eder if his efforts are to be concentrated on “New Haven or greater New Haven?”

Good question, Eder said, “That’s up in the air. We chose to come to West Haven for this discussion because of my involvement with the Community House and Patty.”

Druzolowski noted, “We don’t get a lot of extra resources here,” as a lot of focus, attention and money is being directed to the big cities …

“I’m not a Westie myself,” she added, “but in my heart I am, and I know that we have a high need here,” but not high enough so that it has been a priority for state funding when compared to the bigger cities like New Haven, Bridgeport and Hartford.

Dr. Patrice Farquharson, executive director of the West Haven Child Development Center, said, “We always try to take advantage of literacy projects … we do it as our funding allows. We also encourage families about the importance of reading,” and among their efforts, “our kids are doing ‘Bookworms,’ … our toddlers, ‘Read to Grow,’ and we welcome any collaboration with the public schools.”

Abel Padro, director of the Head Start program at the West Haven Community House, noted that “there’s a whole array of things going on nationwide” that pertains to reading and literacy. “There is a lot of consistency – literacy in families” and like programs that have been going on for quite some time.
“But two decades later, we not making a lot of progress,” Padro said. Programs come along, “we give out books, etc … but we don’t get the money we need to assess what we’ve accomplished, and to say, ‘Oh, we need to tweak this part to make it better.’

“Parents say they want to have it in their native languages, too,” Padro said.

Eder responded to Padro’s points.

“In my business life, if you can’t measure it then you can’t manage it,” he said. “We don’t know yet what we’re going to measure because the program hasn’t started yet … this meeting is part of the process.

But “we will ask afterward: Is this a one-shot deal or something we want to continue? … but right now we don’t know what it will look like … but I do know that if it turns out to be useful, then I will continue to fund it.”

Eder added that the United Way of Greater New Haven and the Jewish Federation of New Haven have united their efforts “due to my saying to them that they should combine their efforts.”

And addressing the cultural point that Padro cited, Eder said that other projects he has been involved in has “made me realize the importance of culture – as the person at intake may not recognize the real need.”

He then cited the medical term ‘triage,” in making the analogy that it makes little sense in setting up a program without first prioritizing the severity of the condition(s) to be treated.

AnneMarie Paone-Mullin, the city of West Haven’s Human Resources department commissioner, told Eder that she was very interested “in your triage work.” She said that the delivery of social services including energy assistance has become highly “centralized.” Yet when people are in need “they come to the city … people of all ages and all ethnicities,” she said, adding that “children are now translating for Mom and Dad. But when it comes right down to it, we’re not sure their needs are being met. In the community, we don’t have the connectivity” that is needed, which of course, she added, “is all aimed at self-sufficiency.”

Eder responded, “This piece is aimed at the literacy piece alone … and our partnerships are aimed broadly to involve many organizations.”

Several participants including Paone-Mullin liked the idea of having a broadly themed literacy video that could run in the waiting rooms of organizations, including the city’s human resources, social and child and family service departments.
Asst. Supt. Druzolowski said she could see a teacher or social worker “going to a home with a book in hand.” It’s easier at the pre-school level, but more difficult at the school level “where trust may be an issue. Some people have not had good experiences with the schools,” therefore trust can be an issue.

Waldo added that some families have “questionable legal status,” which can also lead to distrust, so this is also an issue at the pre-school level.

The discussion then shifted to the “parent piece,” the shared experience that an adult has reading to a child. Jean Vitale of the Family Resource Center, cited the “Tellabration” event held at the Community House in Fall 2011 and organized by Waldo. “Tellabration! A Celebration of the Oral Tradition” honors the centuries old storytelling phenomenon and tradition from all over the world, with the November performance centering on Native American tales.

“It was tremendous,” Vitale said, and was well received by both parents and children attending.

Institutionalizing the habit of reading to a child was then cited … for instance, having a program meet once a month, including a snack – people will come to expect it and “latch onto it,” someone said. Food is a fantastic draw, but it’s the shared experience of reading to a child that is the important goal.

Eder noted that one strategy under discussion is splitting up the children from the parents and then bringing them back together again.

Paone-Mullin said, “Feeling safe is important – we’re not the police, we’re not the INS (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service).”

Eder then asked, “What is feeling safe?”

“Relationships are key,” one person responded; others nodded in agreement.

Stevens said in noting the Community House situation, “We’re not the police, and we’re not the schools so it may be easier for us to draw them (parents) in.” And when it comes to Parent/Family training, Stevens added that “training our own staff and funding can be issues.”

Eder then asked, “What is being done to collaborate in West Haven?”

Stevens noted that there are “pieces already in place.”

Eder retorted, “It sounds like it’s not a ‘branded’ piece. Branding can help bridge the ‘safety’ issue and build an organization from the various existing pieces.”

Waldo noted that budgets don’t always allow the purchasing of books every year for a child, so “sustainability would be a key piece” to her.

The discussion then shifted to the young child versus focusing on school-age children.

Eder said, “The first 10-15 pages of Diane’s book apply to ‘technique,’” which is applicable across all ages. “In fact, the technique is so simple that you say to yourself, ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’”
West Haven Mayor John Picard admitted that agencies, private and public, “don’t always work well enough together,” which begs the next question, he said, which is, “How do we take this a step further?”

“The vast majority just want some help so they can help themselves,” the mayor said. “Keeping families involved is going to make society better.”

Stevens, returning to Eder’s mention of “branding,” noted that “the Early Childhood Council exists. That’s a vehicle we could use to build this.”

Eder asked the group, “This piece – is this something you want help with?”

“That’s the key question … perhaps Patty can be the centerpiece” as the group moves forward to the next step, he said.

The timeframe of Frankenstein’s public meetings was then briefly discussed. “Diane will be here in May to finalize our October program,” Eder said.

He was confident that the inspiration she gave him would quickly spread to others. “If you see her in action, if you spend a little time with her, you will be excited and want to participate,” Eder said. “There will be plenty of opportunities for various constituencies to take part in the May piece.”

- 30 -

For more information on this release, please contact Chris Carroll, West Haven Community House Director of Development and Communication, at (203) 934-5221, ext. 133.