

Sharing Mana'o

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By KATHY COLLINS (kathycollins@manaoradio.com) , For The Maui News

My father used to say that reading and music - or more precisely, appreciation and love for both - were the greatest gifts a parent could give a child. Indeed, my earliest memories are of my parents singing me to sleep, softly strumming their ukuleles. Sometimes Daddy would play "Red River Valley" or "Red Sails in the Sunset" on his harmonica. To this day, whenever I hear the plaintive wail of a harmonica, I see the color red in the back of my mind and I feel a tug at my heart. I get a little sleepy too.

I don't remember my parents reading me bedtime stories, although I'm sure they did. I do recall reading to them, often, and with great pride and pleasure. Daddy taught me how to read before my third birthday; first the alphabet and simple words, neatly handwritten on memo pads, then street signs and magazine covers. It was a fun game and a surefire way to please my dad, which is, after all, the main goal in life for every 3-year-old Daddy's girl.

By the time my social circle expanded to include my kindergarten classmates, I had come to love reading for the sake of reading. As an only child, I found companionship and comfort in books, food for my soul and fuel for my fantasies. I'm embarrassed to admit that I read far less today than I did as a child. Unless you count emails and text messages.

It's a shame, because I do love to read. And I especially love reading aloud, always have. That was my favorite part of 5th-grade English. We read "Treasure Island" and "Old Yeller" in class, a chapter a day, each student taking a turn at reading a paragraph out loud. As soon as the first one began, I would count the number of readers before me, then look ahead to see which paragraph would be mine. I think I was the only kid in class who wasn't praying for a one-sentence paragraph. Other times, when the teacher wanted someone to read aloud from our textbook, I'd silently vibrate her, "Pick me! Pick me!" because, of course, it was totally uncool to volunteer.

That's why, earlier this month, I was overjoyed to participate as a guest reader in the Read Aloud Program (RAP) at Paia and Wailuku elementary schools. But it's not what you'd think; I didn't read storybooks to children, although I would have thoroughly enjoyed doing so. Instead, I read to their parents. Just like back at Makawao School, I was reading to my peers, all of us swept up and away in the same story, yet each with a unique picture in mind. That's the beauty and the power of the written - or spoken - word. I'd much rather be read to, having someone else's words arouse mental images of my own creation, than watch television shows crafted for the masses. Of course, if Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson ever gets on "Dancing with the Stars," that would absolutely be must-see TV for me.

RAP is administered by Read Aloud America, a nonprofit organization founded 16 years ago by Jed Gaines of Oahu. The program, also created by Gaines, focuses on Family and Fun, with a capital "F" both times, and there's another prevalent "F" word - Free! Frisbees and beach balls fly through the air, rewards for kids who answer literary questions. Lots of books are given away. When the children break off into age-level groups and listen to stories read by volunteers, the parents and caregivers relax and hear stories themselves, along with tips on reading aloud and creating family time. The evening concludes with dinner for all and more prizes. The more books you read, the more library visits you make, the more RAP sessions you attend, the better your chances of winning a prize. Even the grownups get prizes, including big-ticket items like a set of automobile tires. But as RAppers are fond of saying, it's not what you take home in your hand; it's

what you take home in your heart that's important. Clearly, everyone at a RAP session takes home the gift my dad talked about: the joy of reading.

If you're one of the gifted, whether by RAP, a favorite teacher, or your mom or dad, I hope you'll join me in paying it forward. Because of state budget cuts, RAP has lost 95 percent of its funding, nearly a million dollars. Passionate about promoting literacy, Gaines promises that RAP will continue, somehow. Your contributions, statements of support, ideas for funding, and partnership opportunities are welcomed. Learn more at www.readaloudamerica.org or the Read Aloud America Facebook page. And take a few minutes to read to someone today

. . . even if it's just yourself. Share the pleasure - the RAPture, if you will - of reading aloud.

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