

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Sun, Apr. 06, 2008

Mom provides haven for learning

BY RISA BERRIN

Darlene Bell-Alexander was tired of seeing kids struggle academically in her neighborhood.

So, the 43-year-old attorney decided to set aside her law books and open Ms. Permello's Reading Room in a space next to her father's neighborhood convenient store, Bell's Short Stop, in Perrine.

Bell-Alexander, a married mother of four boys who lives in Perrine, said she wanted to address the educational problems in her community.

"I kept running into parents who needed something and kids who needed something," said Bell-Alexander, who worked as in-house counsel for the University of Miami before entering private practice. "Parents now have another venue in their neighborhood for their children to learn."

Bell-Alexander wanted to create a "nice, comforting space" where students, in elementary through high school, and parents could gather during weekday afternoons and weekends free of charge.

The Reading Room provides personal tutoring, FCAT tutoring, college prep sessions and book discussion groups. It has computers, a library of over 2,000 books, reading chairs, reading circles and work areas to do homework.

The Reading Room also has a quiet, outdoor garden area for reading.

In addition to providing students with an alternative, Bell-Alexander also wanted to address the lack of parental involvement in her neighborhood.

"What I've seen from the Reading Room is that parents want to be involved," she said.

But many aren't educated or don't remember the basic subjects from earlier years.

So Bell-Alexander gives them resources to help their children.

Mattie Smith is relieved for the help.

"I was very happy because I am a grandmother. With today's schooling, it's been a long time," said Smith, 71, who lives in Perrine.

Her granddaughter, Stayzha Smith, 9, loves going to the Reading Room with her grandmother.

"I like the fact that I get to go with my grandmother because she stays there, and when I need help, she can help," Stayzha said.

Smith said she sees a drastic change in her granddaughter since she began attending the Reading Room. "I see great improvement, even in her behavior, better manners," she said. "At one point, her math was a disaster, much better now. A total turnaround."

Smith said she asked but couldn't get a tutor through her granddaughter's elementary school. That's when she turned to Bell-Alexander.

"She's very helpful. She works hand in hand with the children," Smith said.

Many parents feel that the Reading Room fills a niche not found in schools or libraries.

Alison Kennedy-Davis is a big fan of the Reading Room. She brings all four of her kids, ages 12 to 17, there.

"It's unique because it's so personalized. You can go to a library and get assistance. But the librarian does not know how to match you with the person with the resources," said Kennedy-Davis, who lives in Redland.

People "are just drawn to it," added Desiree Bell-Davis, Bell-Alexander's sister. "We have a waiting list that is overflowing."

Bell-Davis said part of the Reading Room's success is its casual atmosphere and accessibility.

"Sometimes a teaching authority can be intimidating. They are used to seeing us in the neighborhood. They are familiar with us," said Bell-Davis, who also lives in Perrine.

Taking care of the Perrine's children is something the Bell family has been doing for decades. The Reading Room got its name from Bell-Alexander's grandmother, Permello Bell, one of the first commercial babysitters in Perrine during the 1940s and 1950s.

"I always felt a connection with her. I know that she loved kids and loved her community," said Bell-Alexander. "It was a no-brainer to name it after her."

Bell-Alexander believes in staying close to her roots. In addition to the Reading Room being located next to her father's store, her mother tutors the children in the afternoon and her sister, Bell-Davis, helps with the administrative duties.

The Reading Room is a continuation of Bell-Alexander's desire to serve her Perrine community.

As a young girl, she noticed that many of her neighbors were in need of legal help, but there were few attorneys in Perrine. So Bell-Alexander decided to become an attorney.

Now, she believes education is where she is needed. "We need to be empowering African American communities from the inside out," she said.

"I am grateful and appreciative to have a family that can support me. Those are my jewels. I can in turn do something in the community."

Ms. Permello's Reading Room, 17452 S.W. 104 Ave., is open 3 to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays. Call 305-252-8967 or e-mail Darlene@permello.org for information.

© 2008 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>