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United Way Keeps Kids Learning During COVID

Fitchburg, Massachusetts – COVID-19 has highlighted that our youngest learners are most impacted when traditional in-person education is not possible. Without a high-quality early education, children are 25% more likely to drop out of school, 40% more likely to become a teen parent, 50% more likely to be placed in special education, 60% more likely to never attend college, and 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

Enter the United Way of North Central MA. “One of the pillars of the United Way is a long-term commitment to improve early childhood education for all members of our community”, says Kory Eng, President and CEO of the United Way of North Central MA. “To accomplish this, we have partnered with 10 school districts, Fitchburg State University, and Footsteps2Brilliance to create a transformative model that leverages the smart phones and tablets that families already own to provide eBooks, songs, and educational games in English and Spanish to every family that we serve.”

Realizing that this is an historic moment in education, Mr. Eng and his team created a 30-day Winter Reading Challenge that began on December 20, 2020. Parents and their children were encouraged to read and write on the Footsteps2Brilliance bilingual apps throughout the winter break.

While the United Way was helping to feed the community through its Supplemental Basic Needs Fund, it also found a novel way to promote the Winter Reading Challenge. It packaged information about the Challenge in meal kits distributed to families in need. The parents ate it up. Over 900 pre-K through 3rd grade students logged into the Footsteps2Brilliance apps to participate in the challenge.

“The results were beyond all expectations,” said Ilene Rosenthal, CEO of Footsteps2Brilliance. “During this period when families were fighting to meet the most basic needs, over 900 children spent more than 1,234 hours reading and

writing on the Footsteps2Brilliance programs. This is an incredible example of the collective impact that the United Way and its partners are having on the communities they serve.”

The United Way is pleased to announce that the top readers and winners of a Kindle Fire Tablet are:

- 1st Place: Aenea Batista-Lin, a 2nd grader in the Winchendon Public School District who read 28 hours;
- 2nd Place: Sami Rahman, a 1st grader in the Fitchburg Public School District who read 20 hours;
- 3rd Place: Julia Roufael, a PreK student in the Ayer Shirley Public School District who read 15 hours.

“We are thrilled to award these children with the gift of a Kindle tablet, and applaud the parents who have made literacy a priority in their family,” states Kory Eng. “We also will be awarding Certificates of Achievement to every child who participated and read at least 1 hour during the winter break.”

The Early Literacy Innovation Zone of North Central MA is the first in the nation to leverage the smart phones and tablets that parents already own to provide equitable access to the literacy resources needed to prepare children for kindergarten and 3rd grade reading proficiency. Participating districts include: Athol Royalston, Ayer Shirley, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, Leominster, Lunenburg, Narragansett, North Middlesex, and Winchendon.

“We encourage all residents within the Innovation Zone to use the Footsteps2Brilliance programs for 15 minutes a day,” says Kory Eng. “These programs are provided for FREE by the generous donations of the Innovation Zone partners. Get started here: <https://myf2b.com/iz>.”

About United Way North Central Massachusetts

United Way of North Central Massachusetts improves lives in need by mobilizing the caring power of our community to advance the common good. This is done by uniting volunteers and donors to create positive, lasting change in the communities of Ashburnham, Ashby, Athol, Ayer, Devens, Fitchburg, Gardner,

Groton, Harvard, Hubbardston, Leominster, Littleton, Pepperell, Lunenburg, Petersham, Phillipston, Royalston, Shirley, Templeton, Townsend, Westminster and Winchendon.

About Footsteps2Brilliance

Footsteps2Brilliance, Inc. is the breakthrough early learning platform that accelerates early achievement by uniting the power of mobile gaming technology with the latest in cognitive research. Footsteps2Brilliance provides enticing, interactive, 24/7 learning experiences that digitally link school and home to give students the edge they need for success in school today and the world tomorrow.

www.footsteps2brilliance.com