

Reading a family affair

IMAGINATION LIBRARY AIMS TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S LITERACY SKILLS

| BY MAUREEN NOLAN

You could call the Salleys a storybook family. The children devour books and the family can count on a new one arriving in the mail each month at their home on Syracuse's North Side. The Salleys participate in an ambitious literacy campaign called Imagination Library that targets two North Side Zip codes.

Imagination Library mails a free book each month to children younger than 5 who live in those areas, where half of the children who enter kindergarten lack the pre-literacy skills they need. Citywide, 51 percent of children don't have the skills, according to most recent figures available. The idea is that getting books into a family's hands will prepare more children for success in kindergarten. The books that arrive to the Salley household end up in everyone's hands in one way or another.

The official Imagination Library recipient is daughter La'Lazia Daniels, 3. Stay-at-home mom Felicia McCrary-Salley is there when the books arrive, so she usually does the first reading, after which La'Lazia will cajole someone else, say big brother Robert McCrary, 7, to read it again. Then she'll go back at her mom for an encore. She usually gets it.

McCrary-Salley has been a reader since she discovered "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" as a child. She says books helped her stay balanced during a tough childhood in the foster care system. She and her husband, Talivo M. Salley Sr., are trying to make sure their children develop a love of reading.

"Kids come here a blank slate. If you don't encourage them, if you don't show them the way, they're not going to know the way. If they don't see their parents read, they're not going to read. They're not going to think it's something that's important," McCrary-Salley says.

Singer and songwriter Dolly Parton founded Imagination Library nationally, and in May 2010, the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County, the Central New York Community Foundation and the United Way Success by 6 launched it locally.

As of September, the Syracuse effort had enrolled 1,116 children and given away 11,959 books, literacy coalition Executive Director Virginia Carmody says. But perhaps even more excit-



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NARAYAN MAHON

Felicia McCrary-Salley and her husband, Talivo Salley Sr., along with their children read together at the White Branch Library. They use books they receive each month free from Imagination Library. The kids are, from left, Robert McCrary, La'Lazia Daniels and Talivo M. Salley Jr.

ing is a preliminary study by Le Moyne College that indicates families who receive the books are reading more to their children. The percentage of parents who read daily to their children doubled. With the cooperation of the Syracuse City School District, the local partnership plans to evaluate the children's skill level when they enter kindergarten. The first of the children started school in September.

"This is the first big test," Carmody says.

The plan is to expand Imagination Library and potential sites are Syracuse's Near West Site or high-poverty pockets outside the city, in Onondaga County, Carmody says.

Wherever it goes, Imagination Library can be a good thing for children but only if parents do their part by reading to or with their kids, Talivo Salley Sr. says. McCrary-Salley is convinced Imagination Library helps and is needed especially in low-income neighborhoods and in families with parents who are not well educated.

"I think it will open up relationships between the mothers and the fathers and their children. I think if you really love them, you'll take the time out to read to them, plain and simple. It's part of their education," she says. ❖