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Librarian casts spell with page-turning magic

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Corey Gray and her friend Janine Kiessling were wide-eyed as they sat on a carpeted floor Wednesday night at the Charles County Community College's Bookstore watching Nancy Pence read "Poppy the Panda" to them.

Gray and Kiessling were among approximately 20 children — most ages 4, 5, 6 and 7 — who came to a new free children's story hour being held at the college. "The Magic Candle Storytime" is a cooperative effort between the bookstore and the Charles County Public Library. Library branches all over the county already host similar events.

Pence is one of three children's librarians from the La Plata branch who will read to the children during the ongoing program. The others are Joyce Ferguson and Margaret Beigel. The women will rotate each week with library hours scheduled every Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. until Dec. 4, with the exception of Oct. 30 and Thanksgiving eve.

"We believe that reading helps the kids listen to the flow of the language and they can see that there are words on the page and words break up to form the alphabet," Pence said, adding that it is never too early to read to a child.

"... I know moms who breast-feed their babies and read the



Valerie Day and her son, Ricky, enjoy a children's story hour at the community college.

newspaper out loud. ... The earlier (children are read to) the better," she said.

Experts have long been saying that reading to children early is essential in them learning how to read, how to write, how to speak and how to make the connection between thoughts and language. Corey's mother, Mary, agrees: "She really learns a lot from being read to. You don't think they're paying attention all the time, but you'd be surprise what they pick up."

Another mother, Valerie Day, said she and her husband have read to their son, 4-year-old Ricky, ever since he came home from the hospital as a baby. On an average day, Day said, she will read 10-15 books to Ricky.

Ricky's enthusiasm for reading was obvious at the story hour. His eyes focused intensely on the readers as if he were intent on hearing every word, catching every inflection, and seeing every picture. At one point, when Ferguson began to read the book, "Is Your Mama a Llama?" Ricky piped up, "Oh, I have that one" and an excited smile quickly swept across his face.

The hour was a mixture of storytelling, singing and animated tales. A bespeckled Pence, Ferguson and Beigel sat in a corner of the room surrounded by books that stood upright on the carpet in between stuffed animals.

Children were plopped on their mother's lap, some sat separately with their friends while others lounged, either stretched out or their limbs curled up. There were stories about a tail who wagged a dog (instead of a dog who wagged his tail) and a little boy who didn't want to go to bed. There was a priceless moment when Pence attempted to dress a large stuffed bear for bed and continually put the wrong articles on the wrong parts of his body (i.e. his slippers on his ears and paws) as the children yelled, "No, that doesn't go there," giggled and corrected Pence.

But the hour was not just a time for children to be read to, but for parents to enjoy a special treat. "It was a nice break," Valerie Day said. "It gave me a chance to sit and relax with my son."



Photos by Debra Zimmerman Murphey

Children's librarian Nancy Pence reads to young children gathered at the community college for a new story hour.