



A personal essay by Susan Coleman, program coordinator

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Motheread and Fatheread has changed my life. I was trained as a teacher and have been on the staff of the Virginia Foundation for 16 years, but nothing has had an impact on my life as much as Motherread.

When I first learned of the program, it sounded interesting, but I questioned how it supported and advanced the VFH's mission and goals. Family literacy was a term not often used in our staff meetings or in our public hearings or community conversations. Storytelling was almost exclusively a folklore term. Was reading *Good Night Moon* a trivial use of the humanities funding? Should Seeger's *Abiyoyo* and Winter's *Follow the Drinking Gourd* be on the Foundation's shelf beside Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Wright's *Black Boy*? Did Motherread and Fatheread have a place in the humanities?



I soon learned that the answer was an emphatic yes.

The VFH has promoted literature and books, fiction and non-fiction, throughout its 26-year history. Each year we develop and fund book discussion programs held in libraries, colleges, schools, bookstores, and senior centers. Our commitment is demonstrated through the Virginia Festival of the Book, produced by the VFH. Everyone, it seemed, was reading good literature and great stories and sharing it with others.

Virginia is a state of contrasts. It is the home of nationally ranked colleges and universities and excellent cultural and historic institutions. Yet according to the U.S. Census, over 14% of Virginia's population had no high school diploma and almost 10% had completed fewer than nine years of school. Its legacy of massive resistance condemned many children, black and white, to a lifetime of inadequate reading and writing skills. Immigrants and refugees poured into Virginia seeking refuge. Migrant workers came to pick out fruit and harvest our vegetables. How were the humanities improving their lives?

The VFH Board and staff believe that every Virginian deserves access to good literature and to the power of literature in understanding and expressing the way we feel about ourselves and our community. Motherread/Fatheread could do that.

In *Abiyoyo*, as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, we meet individuals who are pushed and marginalized into the edge of society. In *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, as in *Black Boy*, we come face to face with the trauma of slavery and its continuing legacy today.

The VFH continues its tradition of book discussion groups but now we also hold discussion groups in church basements, Head Start classes, school libraries, migrant camps, and domestic shelters. Across Virginia, I have seen black women and white women discuss race. I have seen inmates discuss responsibility and community. I have seen parents share their family stories and parenting issues. I have seen men sitting in tiny school library chairs reading children's literature and talking about their roles as fathers.

I listen with interest the never-ending arguments over the use of the humanities and who has access to them. I see the humanities in active use every day through Motherread and Fatheread and know that it can transform lives. I end as I began – Motherread has changed my life forever.