



## Volunteers Make the Difference

by Jennifer Sullivan

Reading ASSIST<sup>®</sup> Institute (RAI) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that takes pride in "unlocking the written word...one sound at a time." This literacy organization not only talks the literacy talk, but walks the walk as well, training hundreds of tutors and teachers each year in their multisensory, phonetic-based reading curriculum.

Because of Reading ASSIST's programs, children in Delaware's classrooms and the surrounding communities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey benefit not only from having teachers who have the skills to teach reading in a direct, systematic approach, but those who truly struggle to read have access to RAI's Volunteer Tutor Program. Graduates of RAI's 36 Hour training program work free of charge with children who are at risk for reading failure. Last year, RAI had over 100 trained volunteers serving 37 schools in Delaware alone.

Like many nonprofit organizations, Reading ASSIST<sup>®</sup> Institute was born of a mother's response to the needs of her child. Ginger Biastotto was a Delaware mother with a 12-year old child who, although bright, had not yet learned to read. She turned in desperation to a private school for dyslexic students, and Andrew finally learned to read. Ginger became intrigued with the Orton-Gillingham method of reading instruction that had been so successful with her son. She studied extensively, and based on her research and the scientific research of others, developed her own curriculum. As a result of this mother's love and determination, Reading ASSIST<sup>®</sup> Institute was born.

Through the years, the Volunteer Tutor Program has remained the primary focus for Ginger's organization. Once upon a time, Ginger and her early pioneers had to beg principals for children to tutor. Today, RAI's phones ring off the hook with calls from principals vying for RAI's tutor teams for their schools. The reason is the success that RAI's volunteer tutors have had in the schools. Principals describe students who "take off" in reading as a result of RAI's tutoring program. Parents and teachers alike are thrilled that once moody, recalcitrant nonreaders develop an interest in reading and

begin improving in subjects in which reading is a factor for success.

RAI's curriculum is based on the Orton-Gillingham approach to reading instruction, a strongly phonetic, multisensory method. It employs children's visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic senses allowing learning to take place. At the same time, it allows students to access a structured, phonetic reading program that will help them start at the beginning, understanding the relationships between symbols and sounds.

Of course, the key to delivering instruction lies in the instructors. Volunteers are the heart and backbone of RAI's Volunteer Tutor Program. They complete RAI's 36-hour training course and serve a practicum of 150 tutoring hours as well as complete continuing education hours every year. We represent many cross sections of the community, stay-at-home moms, community leaders, retired teachers, corporate employees, and corporate retirees. We all have one thing in common and that is the driving desire to give all children the skills that will unlock their human potential. We know how important it is to be able to read in this world of written communication and that, of all skills, the ability to decode - unlock the written word - has the greatest potential to improve a child's quality of life.

Although the Volunteer Program has been RAI's cornerstone, the organization has in the intervening years developed other programs to meet the needs of the families and the educational community that RAI serves. In addition to a very popular and effective professional development program that brings RAI's curriculum and methods to school personnel, RAI has initiated a tutor referral program, called the RAI Tutor Service Program, which supplies tutors on a fee-for-service basis. However, the volunteer spirit emerges in this program as well, as all tutors in the Tutor Service Program must maintain at least one student on a voluntary basis.

Whether they are staff, tutors, board members, or office volunteers, the adults who make up the Reading ASSIST<sup>®</sup> Institute family all agree on one point - If a child can be taught to read, a child has the life-long opportunity to learn.

*Jennifer Sullivan is the mother of David and a Reading ASSIST<sup>®</sup> Volunteer Tutor.*