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Editor's Note:

Please send articles for future newsletters to katrinah@sfu.ca



The Reading Bear Society Newsletter

September 2015 | Peer Mentorship



welcome message



**Joanne Roussy, RN, PhD,
President, the Reading Bear Society**

"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."—Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*

Dear friends,

This month, the RBS will launch its third year of the Reading Bear program. To date, over 1,000 youth from four high schools and six elementary schools across Vancouver have participated in peer-reading visits.

But behind the numbers are the stories from parents, teachers, and children, which tell us the impact of what we have accomplished together. This edition of the Reading Bear newsletter is focused on the stories of the peer-reading visits and the relationships that have been established. They show us that as the gifts of reading and mentorship are exchanged, hearts are connected and friendships spread across the city.

I am certainly touched by the stories I hear from parents and teachers. This past spring, I met a mother whose teen was a peer-reading buddy. She told me how the transition to a new school was challenging on many fronts, but that his silver lining was having a little reading buddy in another school.

In this back-to-school newsletter, you will hear these stories. You will hear from teachers about the power of the relationships that start in their classrooms and connect students to their community. You will also hear from students about how simply reading with their little buddy has changed them.



THE READING BEAR

This year, we look forward to launching the reflective journaling component for teens and the *My Bear* workbook to accompany each buddy visit. We have been preparing these materials for the past two years, and we are so grateful to all of the teachers, advisory board members, and medical students who have worked so hard to help create this program. I'd also like to thank our friends at Human Early Learning Partnership for sharing their resources and expertise.

And thank you to everyone for supporting the Reading Bear Society in our efforts to promote early literacy and social and emotional health to all youth in Vancouver.

We believe that building friendships across the city encourages children to care for one another. Your gift of heart ensures we will be able to foster literacy across generations and as a foundation for lifelong learning. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I wish you all the best for this upcoming school year.



*From top left: Victoria Baronas, Ryan Chapman, Ryan Melsom, Andrew Deonarine
Second row: Santhe LeBlanc, Lani Morden, Joanne Roussy
Third row: Stephanie Gold, Lynne Stanger*



**Santhe LeBlanc, MEd, Co-founder & RBS Director,
Head of Grade 8, St. George's School**

This year's Reading Bear was another huge success with every St. George's Grade 8 student paired with a little buddy in Vancouver. I keep seeing the meaningful relationships develop, and this symbiotic experience has crystalized over the last three years. Year after year, we see some of our most vulnerable students in a different light as their hard exteriors of protection melt away in front of their little buddies. Every year our most advantaged students walk away with bigger hearts and a clearer understanding of the power of relationships. While one of our most important pillars is literacy, the power of empathy and time devoted to relationships keeps resonating as some of the most powerful



values our program provides. Wouldn't our city be so much more connected if we could foster relationships such as these beyond our one year RBS program?

Next year we are excited to incorporate the Reading Bear into our curricular programming – social issues surrounding literacy/health stats will be covered in Social Studies classes, reflective journaling will be incorporated in English classes, and an element from the ambassadors will be included into our Science classes. With a more integrated approach we are looking to increase understanding and empathy in our students with the hands-on application solidifying the entire experience. I would also like to take this opportunity to introduce Ryan Chapman who will be filling in for Heather Morris as Head of Service Learning during her one year maternity leave.



In conclusion, I would like to give a big thank you to the Kindergarten teachers who are critical in making this program a reality and a success. Without their dedication and willingness to participate there wouldn't be a program. I would also like to thank Joanne Roussy for her dedication and non-wavering commitment – her role modeling is inspirational.



**Colleen Sturrock, MEd, RBS Advisory Board Member,
Kindergarten teacher, Lord Strathcona Elementary**

My Kindergarten class and I had the amazing opportunity to work with Grade 8 big buddies from St. George's School again this year. The children were so excited about meeting their big buddies from another school in Vancouver. During our first buddy visit, I witnessed the beginning of some caring friendships that would last throughout the school year. Many of my students thought it was special that their very own buddy would travel on a school bus across Vancouver to come and visit them. Every month the class would cheer out loud when I announced the date of the next big buddy visit. Each day, many times a day, I would be asked, "Are the big buddies coming today?" or "When are the big buddies coming back?" We eventually created a countdown activity, and every morning we counted down the days until our next buddy visit.

During the visits, many children created special bonds with their big buddies. The buddy pairs worked together, cooperatively and collaboratively, in all of the activities and reading



we did during each visit. The one-to-one interaction with a buddy was so important and meaningful to the students. The children were appreciative of the bear, books, and cards that the big buddies brought during the visits and felt the need to give back. Soon our art centre was transformed into a card and gift-making centre for our buddies. One student created a Big Buddy Mailbox to hold all of the artwork and cards created for the buddies. When the big buddies were absent, they sent thoughtful notes to their little buddies to let them know why they were away. This had a huge impact, as many children walked around with the notes for the remainder of the day.

For one of my students, I witnessed a transformation. For seven months of the school year she was a very shy student and reluctant learner who struggled academically and was not interested in looking at books or the process of reading. During the first session, I noticed her smiling, opening up and interacting with her Grade 8 buddy. The one-to-one support and interactions with her buddy over the three sessions had increased her confidence in herself and her learning. By the end of Kindergarten, her favourite activity was looking at books in the reading area.

A wall in the classroom dedicated to our big buddies became a large documentation panel of the interactions, friendships, and learning. The panel allowed the children and their families to view and respond to the highlighted learning experiences. Each time more was added to the panel, a large crowd gathered around to look at the new buddy experiences. The families were informed and became well versed in the Reading Bear program. When the children missed their buddies, they would visit the wall to look at the photos and remember something that would make them smile. In addition to the panel, as a class we would debrief and reflect upon each buddy visit. At the end of the year, the children shared their gratitude towards the big buddies. They were thankful for everything! They were most grateful for having friendly and kind buddies who would visit to spend time with them as well as work with them.



[Thank you video to St. George's School big buddies from Division 18 little buddies](#)



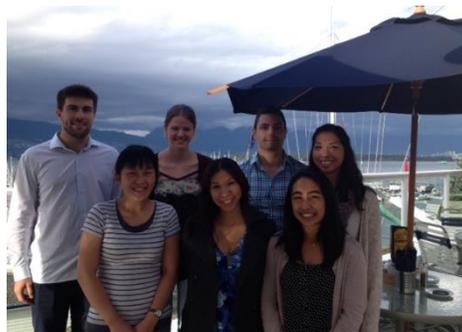
Christine Wang, Director of Students

It has been almost three years since I joined the Reading Bear, but I still remember sitting in Doctor, Patient and Society (DPAS) class in first year and listening to Dr. Roussy's presentation about Reading Bear. I was deeply moved by Dr. Roussy's passion at that time, and after my DPAS project with Reading Bear, I continued to be involved as a part of the student ambassador group, helping to recruit new volunteers for Reading Bear. I was fortunate to have the help from Andrew, Katrina, Jenny, and Cristian to recruit students from both Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia.

It's been a rewarding experience, and this year, I am honoured to have the opportunity to build on Isabel's work as the Director of Students.

Other key roles in the student ambassador team include Jenny Lee (Chair of Administration, Chair of Reading Bear School Clubs), Katrina Hsu (Chair of Media & Communications), Victoria Baronas (Chair of School Visits), Cristian Vadeanu (Chair of Fundraising), Andrew Pursell (Chair of Research), Katrina Dutkiewicz (Ambassador to York House School), and Liam Matthews (Ambassador to St. George's School).

I would like to thank Dr. Roussy and the Board of Directors for their tireless support in all Reading Bear projects. I am also grateful for all the expertise and assistance of the Reading Bear advisory board that make all of our projects possible. Moreover, I would like to thank all the volunteers for their participation in administrative tasks and school visits! Last but not least, I am grateful that Dr. Poole, the DPAS director of my second-year DPAS class, for opening the door to such wonderful experience! We are stronger, together!



The Reading Bear's student volunteers at their first meeting on August 30th.

From top left: Liam Matthews, Victoria Baronas, Cristian Vadeanu, Katrina Hsu,

Second row: Christine Wang, Jenny Lee, and Chelsea Almadin.



RBS 2015-2016 calendar

August



- **August 30th**: Ambassador meeting 5:30pm

September



- **September 1st**: First RBS Board meeting
- **September 3rd**: Presentation by Dr. Deonarine & Victoria Baronas to middle-high school teacher/administrators
- **September 15th**: MUS Medical Undergraduate Fair
- **September 24th**: Teacher orientation TBA
- Peer-buddy matching by teachers

October



- Introduction to kindergarten classrooms by ambassadors
- Children selected to make Christmas-holiday season cards
- First buddy visit: *My Bear, My Buddy, and Me*

November



- Christmas-Holiday cards sales commence
- Second buddy visit: *B is for Bear*

December



- **December 3rd**: Christmas/Holiday season party
- StrongStart book and bear delivery
- Third buddy visit: *Bear Celebrates*

January



- Fourth buddy visit: *Bear Bedtime*

February



- Valentine's Day ambassador kindergarten visit
- Fifth buddy visit: *Special Bear*

March



- Sixth buddy visit: *Happy Bear*

April



- Seventh buddy visit: *Earth Bear*

May



- StrongStart book and bear deliveries
- End of school year ambassador visit to kindergarten classrooms
- Eighth buddy visit: *Thankful Bear*



congratulations



Dr. Lynn Miller presented APA award

RBS advisory board member Dr. Lynn Miller has been selected to receive the 2015 American Psychological Association Early-Career and Mid-Career Award for Outstanding Contributions to Benefit Children, Youth, and Families. The purpose of this award is to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions in science, policy, and practice that benefit the psychological functioning or well-being of children, youth, and families.



UBC Medical School MD graduates Isabel Chen (Co-founder and Director) and Cynthia Gunaratnam (Ambassador)

On behalf of everyone at the RBS, congratulations and best wishes for your future endeavours. Isabel delivered a heartfelt valedictorian speech that touched the heart of her graduating class. Cynthia has begun her paediatrics residency program in Edmonton, and Isabel her family practice residency in Los Angeles.



Kay Fung receives CFPC Scholarship

Kay Fung is the recipient of the \$10,000 scholarship from the College of Family Physicians of Canada. Kay is a fourth-year medical student, ambassador, and co-editor of the newsletter.



Congratulations to Isabel Chen on her wedding to Dr. Kyle Ragins

Isabel's wedding was held in New York City on May 26th, 2015. On behalf of your Reading Bear family, best wishes on this wonderful journey as you build your new lives together.

The Reading Bear experience as an SDPO student

Kay Fung, Ambassador, Newsletter Co-Editor

I first became involved with the Reading Bear two years ago as a second-year medical student as part of a Student Directed Project. Through this project, I had the opportunity to pilot a series of presentations with another medical student to the kindergarten class at Admiral Seymour Elementary School. It was such a joy to see the excitement on the children's' faces whenever we would come, and to hear about their reading adventures with their Big Buddies from St. George's. After the project was finished, I have continued to be involved with RBS, helping develop a set of resources for the reflective writing component of the Reading Bear Manual, and also as an editor for the RBS newsletter. Through my experiences, I have seen first-hand the importance of early literacy and its impact on social well-being and emotional health. Wherever my future medical practice may lead, I know I will take with me the importance of health advocacy and the fact that we are indeed "Stronger, Together".



introducing



Stephenie Gold, MA, RBS Advisory Board Member

Stephenie Gold is a Registered Clinical Counsellor and Director at the LEAP Clinic in Vancouver, and since 2003, has been in private practice supporting children, youth, and doing parent consultation. Stephenie frequently delivers workshops on a variety of parenting and mental health-related topics. As a frequent contributor to AnxietyBC, Stephenie coordinated the Parent/Caregiver Section, and was a lead contributor for the educational videos on helping children with separation anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder. Most recently, she has coordinated the sections for Teens/Youth and Perinatal Anxiety as well as the popular self-help app for anxious teens MindShift. Stephenie is a graduate of the Advanced Studies program at the Neufeld Institute, and is a committee member for the Dalai Lama Centre. She incorporates a range of research-supported interventions informed by new advances in neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology into her work. Stephenie is also a proud mother of two children.



Penny Shepherd-Hill

Penny Shepherd-Hill is currently completing her Master of Arts in Special Education at UBC and is excited to be joining the Reading Bear team. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Leadership from Trinity Western University in 2013 and became an active member of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation after completing the PDP

at Simon Fraser University in 2001. At present, Penny teaches Grade 2 at Maple Ridge Christian School. Over the past eight years she has concentrated her professional development on interventions specific to dyslexia. Penny has led in-service professional development initiatives; provided regional, provincial and international workshops on dyslexia; and presented workshops for parents. Her passion for those marginalized in society has led her to serve on a number of committees, adopting a proactive and collaborative approach to helping those with special needs. She invites you to check out her blog [here](#).



Liam Matthews, RBS Ambassador to St. George's School

Liam Matthews is a graduate of McMaster University's Bachelor of Health Sciences Honours Program. He was introduced to the Reading Bear during the summer of 2013 when he met with Dr. Joanne Roussy and visited Seymour Elementary School. Since then, he has created his own literacy initiative in Hamilton, Ontario where he was able to partner an independent school, Hillfield Strathallan College, and McMaster Health Science with three different elementary schools and run multiple large scale book drives. This year, Liam is starting his first year of medical school at the UBC Southern Medical Program. He is looking forward to continuing his early literacy work with the Reading Bear in both Vancouver and Kelowna. An overview of Liam's work in Hamilton can be seen on his website [here](#).



StrongStart visits

RBS volunteers visited StrongStart centres at Queen Alexandra on May 13th and Admiral Seymour on June 3rd.



L. Cynthia Gunaratnam, RBS Ambassador

They started off clumped together on the carpet, nervously eyeing the toddlers and parents who sat across from them. This was the initial reaction of the Vancouver College students as they started their first Reading Bear visit to Queen Alexandra’s StrongStart Program.

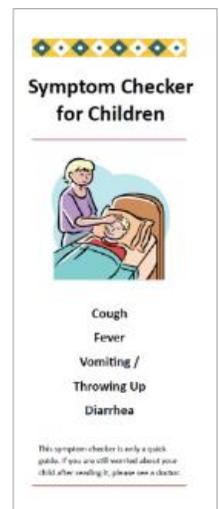
This year, Vancouver College was given the opportunity to participate in the Reading Bear program. The entire school community welcomed the opportunity. Led by their sponsor teacher, Ms. Vernier, Grade 12 student leaders, Seann Gunaratnam, Cameron Carvalho, and Allyn Lee recruited a small group of Grade 11 and 12 boys who held a book drive and fundraised for teddy bears, colouring books, and crayons.

As an ambassador, I held a pre-visit meeting to encourage them to be curious, open-minded, and thoughtful. We discussed their role in a StrongStart classroom, expectations for the visit, and issues surrounding confidentiality and respect.



At Queen Alexandra, my favourite moment was hearing the boys who participated talk amongst themselves at the end of their visit. They shared thoughts about how long it had been since they had interacted with children and how much fun they had just playing for a portion of their day. Ms. Vernier shared her appreciation for the experience and highlighted that she had never seen the students in this light – flexibly interacting with toddlers, speaking kindly and empathetically to parents, sitting cross-legged on carpeted floors, crawling through play houses, creating friendships, and reading picture books.

It was also a great opportunity to meet parents and distribute information to them, such as the “When to visit the doctor” pamphlet. They expressed genuine appreciation for the simplified, pediatrician-approved pamphlet, which was created by Christine Wang. Much like her, I hope that a long-term partnership stems from this experience - because the learning exchanged at this first visit was magical.





Katrina Hsu, Chair of Media & Communications

I started my role with the Reading Bear as editor of the newsletter. Every edition, I am blown away by the remarkable stories, touching photos, and amazing progress I get to be a part of sharing. The amount of work and love that has been put into this project is continually inspiring.

Yet, it does not compare to the experience of being part of classroom visits, and witnessing first-hand what the Reading Bear is all about. I had the opportunity to adapt our introductory kindergarten module to something more suitable for our StrongStart visits. While spontaneity often triumphed over my planning, it's these unique moments that often end up being memorable –



moments such as unscheduled bubble blowing, more time for one-on-one reading, or an extra bear given for a child's sister.

At Queen Alexandra, I read with a three-year-old girl and her mother. At the end of each book she would insist on another, and we ended up going through all five of the books included in her bag. She would chatter and point at pictures in a mixture

of Polish and English, her amused mother providing translation where necessary. The potential power of reading is so apparent at times like these, and I hope to see the Reading Bear continue to illustrate this power through its program.



Hirad Nourbakhsh, Book Drive Coordinator

In early June, I had the opportunity to accompany Reading Bear on a visit to the StrongStart program at Admiral Seymour Elementary School. It was to be Reading Bear's last visit



Teachers Misty and Ali from Admiral Seymour StrongStart

before the end of the school year. We began by visiting several classrooms in the school and getting the children to say goodbye to their classroom bear. The children's reactions were truly heartwarming; within seconds they were rushing to hug and kiss the classroom bear



goodbye. Later, we packed bags with books, stuffed animals, and bubble blowers to deliver to the children. I began by reading to a three-year-old named Hannah. While at first she was easily distracted by bubbles and her stuffed giraffe, she and another child soon became engaged in the story and listened with delight until the end. To finish the session, Victoria, another volunteer, read *Big Bear Hug* to the group. The children listened calmly, with attention and interest, surprising for a group of two- to four-year-olds. Overall, it felt wonderful to be able to provide books to children who may not have ready access to them at all times. The children enjoyed the visit greatly, and I am truly glad to have contributed to their experience.



from our parents

From St. George's School parents

I just wanted to thank you for organizing the reading buddy field trips this year. I am a teacher and I know first-hand how rewarding this is for the little ones, who are so excited to see their big buddies come and share this time with them. My son loves having reading buddies and has really enjoyed this opportunity this year. Our family hears all about his little buddy each time he comes back from going to Admiral Seymour.

The Grade 8 boys' lives are so busy that we believe it is so important for them to have the time to be mindful of others and to focus their time on others, rather than always on themselves and their needs. I am not sure if this reading buddy opportunity continues into Grade 9, but if it does, my son will be very excited to be a part of it.



Boris Milosevic, Parent, Lord Strathcona Elementary

From Kathleen Stormont, parent, Lord Strathcona Elementary

It's not hard to imagine how anxiety may grip a five-year-old in the first year of school: no care givers, bigger kids (and lots of them), new skills to learn and relationships to negotiate. But introducing these new students to their older peers through the Reading Bear program can not only alleviate some of the anxiety of mixing with "those big kids", but also reinforce the joy of learning while building a relationship between the different age groups.

My five year old daughter's exposure to an older student – who demonstrated his interest in working with her through reading and unique craft activities – helped smooth her bumpy transition into school. The gift of a cuddly teddy bear certainly helped, too! How wonderful for her, an only child, to have a young mentor help inspire her interest in learning and instill a new-found confidence in social situations with children of all ages. At the same time, it's easy to see how this mentoring experience would generate empathy and compassion in the older students for the younger ones. Bringing the different generations together in the Reading Bear program is a win-win for the students and the school community. I'm glad my daughter had the opportunity to play a part in it.



from our teachers



From Julie Gelson, RBS Advisory Board Member

My Kindergarten/Grade 1 class at Queen Alexandra Elementary was fortunate to be paired with a Grade 5 class from York House School through the Reading Bear again this year. The anticipation before each visit was so fun to watch, as my students talked for days, and sometimes weeks, about seeing their buddies again and what books they would read together during their next visit. One of my Kindergarten girls, Lisa, was particularly excited about seeing her two buddies each time. Her mom told me Lisa always had trouble sleeping the night before a visit because she just couldn't wait to see her buddies! I loved watching Lisa interacting with her reading buddies. As they took turns reading to her, she would turn and listen to each one with an intense focus. After one visit, she was a bit teary and I asked her if she was okay. She said, "I just love them so much." And she did. Our visits with our York House buddies were always full of stories, smiles, and laughter. What a gift for a teacher to see her students so engaged and excited about reading! Thank you Reading Bear and York House for another year full of delight, wonder, and friendship!



[Liz Hayes-Brown, Vice Principal of Collingwood Elementary, talks about the mutual benefits of peer reading with the Reading Bear](#)



[Melanie Moore, Kindergarten teacher at Queen Alexandra](#)



from our students



My Reading Bear Experience: Making a Buddy

Five months after the initial experience, I can still remember the unease and anxiety I first felt when I stepped off the bus and examined the school in front of me. I was excited to finally meet my Reading Bear Buddy, but at that first visit, he did not appear interested in reading with me, instead sitting at his desk with his hands crossed and speaking little.

Over the weeks leading up to the next visit, I searched for any book that my buddy might like based on the small pieces of information he gave me about himself. At our next visit, he again seemed quite shy. I started quietly reading one of the new books to him at his desk. In the middle of the book, his favourite animal was mentioned and his eyes popped open. He immediately leaned over to see the pictures in the book and a smile slowly spread across his face. This was a look that I will never forget.

Over the next few times that I met him, I read him many more books. He smiled more and started to open up a little more. I noticed that he started paying more attention to me when I was talking, and was doing the same with his peers and teachers in the classroom. Whenever I showed up for a Reading Bear session, my buddy would never hesitate to come over and talk to me right away. He would laugh and smile and show me some of the activities he had done for his work at school.

When the program ended, we were both sad, but knew that it was a great experience for both of us. I am happy that I was able to get to know my buddy better and break through the barriers that were presented at the beginning.



many thanks to

The **DASH Healthy Schools Network** grant of \$750 to support engaging students in healthy living activities and inquiries at school. A special thank you to **Kari McDougall**, Project Coordinator of DASH BC.



Sylvia Doldson, Executive Director of the **Get Bear Smart Society**, for providing scientific bear facts, resources, and books that will be incorporated into the program this year. <http://www.bearsmart.com>



literacy links

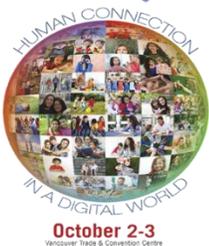


Growing Up in B.C. – 2015

Growing Up in B.C. – 2015 examines the question, “How are our children doing right now?” as a follow-up to the first *Growing Up in B.C.* report issued in 2010. The report documents the state of B.C.’s children and youth over six areas of well-being, and features the perspectives of both youth and experts.

upcoming events

HEART-MIND  2015



Heart-Mind 2015: Human Connection in a Digital World

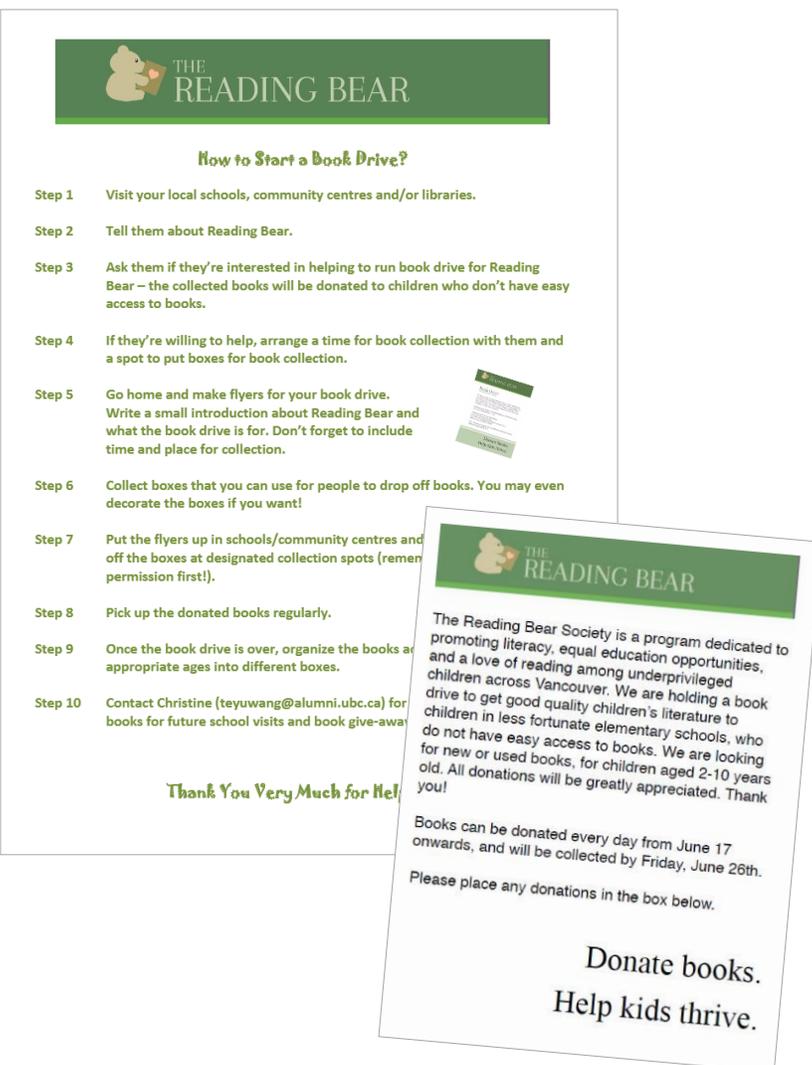
The 3rd annual Heart-Mind Conference will be held October 2-3, 2015 in Vancouver. Heart-Mind 2015 focuses on the ever-changing landscape of social interaction in our digital world.

RBS book drives

Interested in helping out?

We're always in need of books for children ages 2-10. If you would like to donate or assist us in future book drives, please contact us.

teyuwang@alumni.ubc.ca



How to Start a Book Drive?

- Step 1 Visit your local schools, community centres and/or libraries.
- Step 2 Tell them about Reading Bear.
- Step 3 Ask them if they're interested in helping to run book drive for Reading Bear – the collected books will be donated to children who don't have easy access to books.
- Step 4 If they're willing to help, arrange a time for book collection with them and a spot to put boxes for book collection.
- Step 5 Go home and make flyers for your book drive. Write a small introduction about Reading Bear and what the book drive is for. Don't forget to include time and place for collection.
- Step 6 Collect boxes that you can use for people to drop off books. You may even decorate the boxes if you want!
- Step 7 Put the flyers up in schools/community centres and off the boxes at designated collection spots (remember permission first!).
- Step 8 Pick up the donated books regularly.
- Step 9 Once the book drive is over, organize the books and separate them into appropriate ages into different boxes.
- Step 10 Contact Christine (teyuwang@alumni.ubc.ca) for books for future school visits and book give-aways.

Thank You Very Much for Helping!

THE READING BEAR

The Reading Bear Society is a program dedicated to promoting literacy, equal education opportunities, and a love of reading among underprivileged children across Vancouver. We are holding a book drive to get good quality children's literature to children in less fortunate elementary schools, who do not have easy access to books. We are looking for new or used books, for children aged 2-10 years old. All donations will be greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Books can be donated every day from June 17 onwards, and will be collected by Friday, June 26th.

Please place any donations in the box below.

**Donate books.
Help kids thrive.**

Hirad Nourbakhsh, Book Drive Coordinator

This June, I participated in an RBS book drive at the Commons Block community centre at UBC, Pacific Spirit daycare, Jules Quesnel Elementary, and Queen Mary Elementary. The staff and administration were kind enough to let me post flyers and boxes around their buildings. I was initially skeptical about the results of the book drive; after all, there was only a week and a half left of the school year at the time that I began. However, returning to the boxes I left, I was pleasantly surprised to find that they had been filled with good-quality, cared-for books. One parent at Jules Quesnel even helped me transport the books back to my house, seeing that there were too many to carry on my bike. All in all, I was happy to see how generous the parents and staff at these schools were. Their benevolence showed genuine interest in helping children who normally do not have easy access to books and made this book drive a truly memorable experience.

