

Her mission: Get those pages turning

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By KAREN M. THOMAS / The Dallas Morning News

To understand Carla Ranger's passion for reading, she offers this exercise. On the round table in her office at the Dallas County Community Colleges, she has placed a copy of George Dawson's autobiography, an inspirational tale of overcoming illiteracy at age 98. Ms. Ranger orders the reporter to pick it up without using thumbs. It's difficult, but possible. Then she orders the reporter to open the book and read. That task is impossible.

BRAD LOPER/DMN

'People enslaved had their thumbs cut off if they tried to read,' says Carla Ranger, founder of the African American Read-In. 'And we're not taking the time to read a book? We have got to do this.'

"People enslaved had their thumbs cut off if they tried to read. Some were killed. Others had their eyes gouged out. And we're not taking the time to read a book? We have got to do this," she says. "If we reach just one person, we have to."

That is why Ms. Ranger, an executive of education partnerships at DCCC, founded the community-wide African American Read-In. The free event is aimed at celebrating black writers through performance. It's a place where reading is encouraged and where those who cannot are inspired to get help. The concept of a read-in wasn't new when she started. Seventeen years ago, the Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English came up with the idea to celebrate Black History Month. Based on the sit-ins of the civil rights movement, the read-ins called for groups throughout the nation to read for two hours at the same time. The groups are generally small, held in homes, at churches or at schools.

But at the start of the new decade, Ms. Ranger wanted to reach more people. She envisioned a theatrical-style production that brought literature alive. She enlisted national and local celebrities. She cajoled sponsors to provide bookbags, T-shirts and even new books. And she assembled a team of volunteers.

It was supposed to be a one-time event in 2000. This year makes seven. Lines typically form early outside the Majestic Theater, and the seats fill quickly. "I work on this project because it feels so good," Ms. Ranger says. The Read-In is sponsored by the DCCC as well as others including American Airlines, the Dallas Public Library and *The Dallas Weekly*.

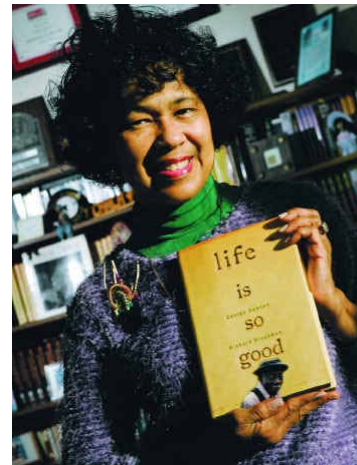
In an interview in her office, Ms. Ranger tells more about the event that has become her mission.

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[African American Read-In: Schedule, join an event](#)

Describe the power of the Read-Ins.

There's a gentleman who came up to me afterward – young man, nicely dressed. He said, "I can't read. What can I do? I'm married. My little girl is 3. I am able to fake it now but in a few years, I won't be able to."



He had never told his wife. He called me three months later. He told his wife and said they were so much closer. He found a program.

The next year, he came to a Read-In and read a poem he wrote about his own illiteracy. He still wasn't a fluid reader. But he had the courage to go to a neighborhood read-in. The next year, he was reading better. He told me there was a test at work that he always wanted to take. If he passed it, he would be promoted. But he never took it because he couldn't read. That year he took it. And passed.

You are obviously very moved by Mr. Dawson and invited him as a special guest in 2000. (He died in 2001 in Dallas, at age 103.) What was it like to have him at the first Read-In?

I told him it would be at the Majestic. I could sense his hesitation. He hadn't been to the Majestic in over 55 to 60 years. I found out he had taken his sons there, and they had to go to the balcony to the colored section. He was a man of dignity. He didn't like it. So he had the memories of how he felt about that. But I told him we would be sitting all throughout the theater, and he would be onstage. He said "Onstage?" That day, he walked out and I could see him look up at the balcony. His tears started to fall. He explained to the audience why. It was such a special moment.

What are some of your favorite memories of the Read-Ins?

A few years ago, a Hispanic family came in dressed in their Read-In T-shirts with the kente cloth emblem from the previous year. They said it was a big event for their family and that it gave them something to talk about when they went home. So we are performing a community service. A friend of mine came with her 85-year-old auntie. They couldn't get in. They went home and began to read to each other. My friend said her aunt hadn't done that with her since she was a little girl. They read for two hours. The aunt called it the highlight of her year.

The event is always first come, first serve. There are no tickets given in advance. Why?

If we reserve 30 seats for a group and then something happens and they don't show, we've prevented 30 other people from coming. And we do it like this because there are those who may not know to R.S.V.P. or reserve tickets. We want to make this as fair as possible. We have people from all walks of life come early and wait on line.

What should you do if you come and can't get in?

The purpose is we want you to read. Even if you can't come in, go home. Round up your family, or a friend, or someone you work with and read with them.

This year's African American Read-In, a tribute to Ossie Davis, will be at 2 p.m. Saturday at the Majestic Theatre, 1925 Elm St. It will feature actor Avery Brooks, as well as local celebrities, storytellers, writers and performers.

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