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Bond library's reading porch is surrounded by artwork depicting scenes from the neighborhood.

AMANDA THOMPSON

'IT FEELS LIKE I'M IN THE STORY'

STUDENTS FIND HAVEN IN BOND'S FRONT-PORCH LIBRARY

AMANDA KARIOOTH THOMPSON
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For hundreds of years, the American front porch has been a significant cultural catalyst. This is particularly true in the South where warm weather allows for, and often mandates, time spent in the protective shade. Porches are for lingering and storytelling; they offer an opportunity to share our worries and our joys. The front porch has become a place of communal reflection and a way to connect with one another.

Writers often use the front porch as an important symbolic element. Readers find it's a perfect place for contemplative page turning. Rhonda Harden, media specialist at Bond Elementary School, believes that a front porch can bring literature to the next generation of book lovers. She has built one in her library for students to enjoy, thanks to the generosity of Target and local volunteers.

"It's a media specialists' dream to create your own space," Harden said, and that's just what she did when Bond constructed a new school in 2006. She knew she wanted a special reading nook that was unique and echoed the neighborhood. "When I looked around, I saw all these front porches and I thought, we could do that."

"When I was growing up, I lived in the same place all my life. I know that security made a difference for me. Our babies, a lot of them don't have that. Our population is very transient, they move a lot. I want the kids to have that feeling of home. This reading porch brings a certain amount of consistency and with that, a certain amount of com-

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Front porch

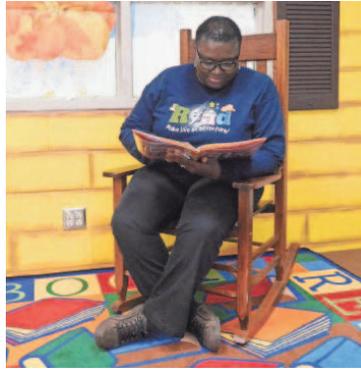
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fort. I want them to always want to be here.”

Second-grader Xi'Marra Parks, a proud relative of civil rights activist Rosa Parks, appreciates the reading porch for exactly these reasons. “We get to read any books we want. We have a comfortable place to be in and I feel really safe.” Harden is delighted to provide a nurturing place for emerging readers and she recalls how reading affected her own life. “It opened up a whole new world,” Harden said. “That’s how I went places.”

Her second-grade students can relate to that sentiment. Kyra Thomas said, “When I read and I see something that I want to do, I visualize me doing it.” Hope Washington agreed and added, “It feels like I’m in the story.” Ji-Raiya Jenkins said that reading “makes me feel excited,” and her classmate Kemani Glasco said, “When we read books we learn stuff that we use later.”

Harden’s first job out of high school was at a library. “It was the best job



AMANDA THOMPSON

Bond Elementary School media specialist
Rhonda Harden reads in her rocker.



ever, I could get in there and just read, they’d let me read all I’d want.” Since

then, she has held many different jobs with the school district and she’s been recognized for her excellence in the classroom. “I’ve been teacher of the year a couple of times, and I was the district winner one year for distinguished educator but I like being called library lady best.”

Her efforts extend beyond Bond’s library as she encourages students to carry the culture of reading into their lives outside of school. “At every opportunity, I’m looking for ways to build libraries at home, even if it’s a shoebox. I’ll say, ‘I’m giving you a book, put this on your shelf and we’ll start you a library.’” She is able to distribute books to students throughout the year because of the school’s supportive administration.

Bond Principal Brandy Tyler-McIntosh is eager to compliment Harden. “She is definitely the biggest advocate in this school when it comes to providing kids with what they need and empowering students through reading. I’m so appreciative that she is as compassionate as she is because it spills over into everything else that we do.” Harden’s innate kindness helps her recognize struggling readers and identify the best methods to support them.

“There’s a certain amount of vul-

nerability that comes with not knowing how and not being able to do. Everybody’s different and it’s simply a matter of finding what’s going to work for that kid. You can’t do that unless you know them. They have to trust you, especially the reluctant readers.”

That kind of trust can only be built on a foundation of mutual respect. Harden values each of her students as individuals and she listens to their ideas, opinions, and concerns. Both she and the reading porch offer students a feeling of comfort and stability, which provides a protective environment for them to flourish and grow.

Harden believes that’s important because “Not only does reading take you places in the world, it takes you places within yourself, and sometimes it helps you to come to yourself. You have to do that, for you. We have to help them reach their potential. We have to be that positive element in their life. I get to make that connection; I get to turn on that light.”

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the education and exhibitions director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).