

Anne J. Arvidson and Pamela Blanco

# Reading across Rhode Island: One Book, One State, Many Successful Readers

The power of community to increase literacy was highlighted in a statewide reading initiative where all residents of Rhode Island were invited to read David Baldacci's *Wish You Well*. Anne J. Arvidson and Pamela Blanco explain how they created and implemented the program and used Baldacci's book in their classrooms.

**T**he hottest new club in Rhode Island is the literacy club. In January 2003, Reading Across Rhode Island invited every Rhode Islander to read the same book and participate in a statewide conversation about the importance of reading, thus joining the “community of written language users . . . the ‘literacy club’” (Smith 2). The success of this initiative is that one book and one state encouraged secondary readers—one student at a time—to become successful, confident, lifelong readers.

## The Initiative

The idea for Reading Across Rhode Island came at the NCTE convention in Baltimore. In November 2001, still unable to understand or accept the horror that had taken place on September 11, I (Anne) wearily boarded a train for Baltimore. Although my destination was the annual NCTE convention, I was setting out on a pilgrimage, seeking inspiration, renewal and, quite simply, answers. What I discovered inspired my colleagues and me to reaffirm our guiding belief that reading is an essential skill and to initiate changes that would give life to our dream of a stronger and richer literacy for all Rhode Islanders.

After attending a conference session, I became intrigued by the possibilities of a community-based literacy model such as One Book, One Chicago. I envisioned a one-state, one-book literacy initiative for my state. I began to imagine the dynamic possibilities of bringing all readers into a conversation about the meaning and value of reading. When I discussed this idea with my colleague Pam Blanco, I learned that she shared my dream of an enriched literacy for

our state and for our students. We began what would become an eighteen-month odyssey.

Having learned in Baltimore that the first step was to locate Rhode Island's Center for the Book, a literacy program affiliated with the Library of Congress, Pam and I pored over the phone book, perused the Internet, and queried colleagues for its location. Ultimately, we discovered that, although Rhode Island did once participate in the Library of Congress's Center for the Book, the program had fallen into disrepair and finally collapsed.

Out of this bureaucratic rubble that had been the Center for the Book emerged a spirit of renewal regarding literacy, a spirit that now included teachers, librarians, professionals, and institutions such as the Providence Public Library. At an initial organizational meeting, an amazing array of citizens committed to literacy convened to share this literacy dream and to make it a reality. As a high school English teacher encouraging the love of literature and wanting secondary students to be a part of this movement, I volunteered to be the chair of the education committee, which, in retrospect, became the seminal moment of my professional career. Matching my level of commitment to the project, Pam became co-chair, and we were off.

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## The Book

We had committees. We had vision. All we needed was *the* book. If the strength of the group charged with selecting *the* book was its diversity, then the weakness

of the group was indeed its diversity, and reaching consensus on one title proved arduous. Meeting the needs of a broad base of readers—in effect, everyone in the general public—created a stranglehold of issues to consider, including racial, religious, gender, and cultural sensitivities. The pragmatic concerns of cost and availability posed yet another hurdle.

During the NCTE convention in Baltimore, I had listened intently as David Baldacci—the best-selling author of many political thrillers and one coming-of-age novel, *Wish You Well*—passionately

argued for accomplished literacy in a democratic society. Baldacci later noted, “Being able to fill out a job application is not enough. If you can’t read at a level to form your own opinions, where do you get your ideas?” (Rourke 3). Baldacci’s question echoed the concerns of many educators in the wake of the events of September 11 and the daily First Amendment challenges. Hearing Baldacci proclaim, “We say people need to read more but we don’t do anything that might generate excitement about reading” (Rourke 3), became the touchstone of the dream

## STUDENTS RESPOND TO *WISH YOU WELL*

### Narrative Responses

- > Literature letters—Pretending to be a character, students will compose a letter either to another character in *Wish You Well* or to a character in another work of literature.
- > Diary entries—Pretending to be a character, students will create diary entries.
- > Extend the novel—Students will compose/amend a scene from the novel that they either think is missing or begging to be written.
- > Postcards—Before reading, students receive a series of postcards written by different characters in which said characters’ conflict, wishes, or observations are noted.
- > Change the genre—Students will transcribe prose into drama.
- > Newspaper—Students will prepare a newspaper account of events, including national news, local news, entertainment, editorials, obituaries, and so forth.
- > Magazine—Students will create a magazine modeled after a current magazine, e.g., *People*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, or *Seventeen*.
- > Wish book—Pretending to be a character, students will create a list in book form that describes their deepest desires or wishes.
- > Annotated recipe—Students will create a character recipe in which they combine culinary elements that reflect the chosen character.
- > How-to guide—Students will create a how-to guide describing one of the following: how to hunt a raccoon, how to survive displacement, or how to live with industrial sprawl.
- > Time or place rewrite—Students will rewrite their favorite scene in a different time and/or place.
- > Prediction chart—Using the signs of the zodiac, students will write insightful horoscopes for characters.

- > “Dear Ann” advice column—Students will compose two letters: one that describes a character’s problem and one that presents a possible solution to the problem.
- > Creative writing—Students will create an original piece of writing inspired by the novel.
- > Multiple points of view—Students will retell a scene from multiple points of view.
- > Quotable quotes—Students will compile and explain the connection between sayings/proverbs from well-known Americans, such as Twain, Dickinson, Thoreau, and Emerson, and characters from *Wish You Well*.
- > Louisa Mae’s last will and testament—Pretending to be Louisa Mae, students will write her last will and testament, a document that will provide insight into her character.

### Analytical Responses

- > Response to quotes—Students will select passages from the novel and will write insightful commentary.
- > Book review critique—Students will write a book review or critique of the novel with an eye to a peer audience.
- > Analytical essay—Students will develop an insightful thesis on a theme or character and write a formal essay.
- > Reader-response journal—During their reading of the novel, students will create a double-entry journal detailing their thoughts, questions, and discoveries.
- > Symbol book—Students will construct a book that demonstrates their understanding of the function of symbols in the novel.
- > Character quilt—Students will create squares of information that will be pieced together to form a character quilt.

to encourage students and all Rhode Islanders to join the literacy club.

As possible titles for our first statewide literacy initiative were proffered, discussed, and discarded, Baldacci's novel *Wish You Well* kept appearing on my scribbled list of potential books. A coming-of-age story set in Appalachia in the 1940s, *Wish You Well* is the captivating story of two nearly orphaned children, Lou and Oz, who must leave the familiar surroundings of New York City to live with their great-grandmother in the rugged

mountains of Virginia. Just as Lou and Oz struggle with the harsh reality of displacement, Louisa Mae Cardinal, their great-grandmother, struggles to preserve her way of life in the fragile landscape of Appalachia as the local coal and gas company attempts to steal her land and her identity. The emotionally compelling characters of Lou, Oz, and Louisa Mae live out their disappointments and accomplishments against the unforgiving land and the tender mercies of their hearts. Just as C. S. Lewis said that "We read to know that we are not alone," we understood that

Ideas developed by Anne J. Arvidson, Exeter–West Greenwich High School, and Pamela Blanco, Coventry High School.

- > Respond to a photograph—Students will provide a written response provoked by a photograph from the Library of Congress.
- > Letter campaign—Students will write a letter in defense of the literary merit of *Wish You Well*.
- > Across the years—Students will defend the relevance of issues in *Wish You Well* to contemporary concerns.
- > Thematic comparison—Students will compare/contrast two works written in different time periods with similar themes and issues.

#### Poetry Responses

- > Poetry sampler—Students will locate and provide connections for five poems and relate them to *Wish You Well*.
- > Where I'm from—Using the poem "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon, students will create a personalized "Where I'm From" poem for both a character in the novel and for themselves.
- > Found poem—Students will manipulate lines of text to create a new poem that provides insight into an aspect of the novel.
- > Circular poetry—Students will create a poem that originates from a line in the text and repeats the last word in each line in the first position of the following line.

#### Visual Art Responses

- > Movie poster—Students will create a movie poster for a specific audience.
- > Illustrated *Wish You Well*—Students will select art, paintings, or sculpture that would compliment *Wish You Well* and defend their choices.
- > Memory box or scrapbook—Students will create and explain a memory box or scrapbook of objects that would be near and dear to a character.
- > Map—Students will construct an annotated map of significant landmarks and events from the novel.

- > Book jacket—Students will design a new book jacket that will include artwork, brief synopsis and review, author information, and teasers and commentary from other authors, characters, and so forth.
- > Appalachia notebook—Students will create a scrapbook-type document in which they present flora, fauna, people, or customs of the Appalachian region.
- > Travel brochure—Students will create a tri-fold brochure for the novel and the region.
- > Everything I need to know about life I learned from *Wish You Well*—Students will create a poster delineating life lessons learned from the novel.
- > Outta character's head—Using an outline of a head, students will fill the head with graphics or words that provide insight into a character's motivation.
- > Freytag's pyramid—Students will create a visually appropriate model that delineates plot with explanation and graphics.
- > Have a happy birthday—Students will select and explain gift choices to celebrate the characters' birthdays.

#### Musical Responses

- > CD for *Wish You Well*—Students will create a selection of music reflective of the events and themes of *Wish You Well* and explain how the selected pieces complement the novel.
- > Original song lyrics—Students will appropriate a favorite song, rewriting the lyrics to reflect a significant event or theme from the novel.

#### Dramatic Responses

- > Dramatic monologue—Pretending to be a character, students will create a dramatic monologue, which could be videotaped.
- > Character interview—Pretending to be reporters or talk show hosts, students will interview characters.

both accomplished readers and struggling readers unconsciously desired to see themselves in the stories they read. Knowing beyond a doubt that this novel would appeal to students and be a wonderful companion piece for other books in our curriculums (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Ellen Foster*, *Montana 1948*), we strongly advocated for *Wish You Well*. Ultimately, the group selected *Wish You Well* for the first year of Reading Across Rhode Island (RARI). With the selection of the book completed, we knew that the initiative would live up to its motto: one book • one state • *literally*.

### Sharing the Experience of Reading

While our neighboring suburban schools are in different districts and are distinctly different in enrollment and age—Pam’s school has two thousand students and is an aging facility, and my school has seven hundred students and is relatively new—many of the students share similar values and work ethics. Many students work part-time, participate in extracurricular activities, and identify with certain aspects of struggling readers, such as weak comprehension, low interest levels, and lack of confidence.

Inspired by Baldacci’s call for a “reading revolution” to promote the democratic value of informed participation, we designed instruction in our classrooms to follow the essence of the initiative—to read communally for the shared experience. Pam’s eleventh-grade students read the novel knowing that there would be no formal test to assess their efforts but that they were expected to come to class ready for a Socratic seminar. Many of them indicated that this was what reading should be—a book and other readers to discuss their impressions with. Alternately, my students were instructed to pick a memorable passage and, for class discussion, be prepared to share their reasons for selecting it. In other words, we wanted students to own the text. To make that a reality, we relinquished the traditional role of teacher and encouraged a student-centered classroom. We became partners in reading with the students.

As educators and readers, we wanted to explore not only the students’ literal responses to the text

but also their ability to read, to interpret, and even to criticize the text. Believing that the students could read successfully and imaginatively, we encouraged them to create *their* meaning of the novel. To that end, we provided a list of ways to respond to the text, using multiple intelligences and multiple disciplines, thus satisfying expectations for standards and accountability (see sidebar). To nurture student ownership of text, we made student choice, authentic assessment, and differentiated response our priorities.

We challenged the students to formulate and defend their interpretations rather than parroting the teachers’ interpretations. Marissa said about a character in *Wish You Well*, “I simply find Miss Cardinal’s situation and sudden recovery highly unlikely, despite the intervention of a magic wishing well and the love of two children.” Katy remarked, “With all the description that Baldacci gives you about his characters, one cannot help but to keep on reading because you know a lot about the characters and care what happens to them.” Another student stated, “When Baldacci described the children exercising Amanda’s limbs and just praying to feel her pushing back it reminded me of when I watched my father do the same with my grandfather’s (his father’s) right arm . . . my grandfather had a stroke.” The students’ responses affirm that “the discourse of interpretation proceeds according to the rules of evidentiary reasoning, and the adequacy and persuasiveness of such reasoning serves as the standard by which all interpretations are evaluated” (Blau 75). In other words, the text becomes the source from which students clarify, extend, and recast their understanding of and connection to the text.

### Sharing Richard’s Story

Richard had a history of being academically unsuccessful, but he committed to improving his grades because he knew from participating in athletics that effort had its own rewards. Unfortunately, he possessed neither sufficient confidence as a reader nor the academic skills necessary to realize his goal. As a result of his vow, though, Richard became a sophomore in a college-preparatory English class in a block schedule.

Richard approached me early in the semester to explain that he was a slow reader who had difficulty remembering what he had read. He was wor-

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ried that he would not be able to keep pace with the assigned text and the required outside reading of two novels every quarter. Richard knew he was in trouble, and I knew it was my charge to maintain standards and expectations while affording Richard the necessary time to address his challenges.

Knowing that he was indeed reading and believing that he was capable of growth as a reader, I negotiated with Richard a reading contract for the extension of due dates. The reading contract demonstrated to Richard that I was an invested partner in his reading success. Furthermore, with his level of stress reduced, Richard could focus on reading to understand rather than reading to get it done. As a result of this agreement, Richard began to see himself as a successful reader who, for the first time, understood that reading is an essential skill that requires both time and practice. He realized that time could be his ally rather than his enemy.

Because of our agreement, Richard approached *Wish You Well* with an open mind and a willingness to engage with the text. In *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy, 6–12*, Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube emphasize the importance of students' making connections and suggest a number of ways of helping them do so. Since family is important to Richard, he realized a connection between the siblings Lou and Oz and his own appreciation of family values. Richard also identified personally with the good-hearted, tragic character of Diamond, the loyal, boon companion of Lou and Oz. As a result of often-modeled and frequently practiced literacy strategies—rereading, predicting, questioning, and reflecting—and because he was more comfortable with the dynamics of text and time, Richard gained ownership of the novel by seeing it as a story that he wanted to be part of.

Following a night of reading *Wish You Well*, students tumbled into the early-morning classroom excitedly discussing new information. Conversations swirled around a myriad of topics, and I suddenly became aware that Richard, towering above me, was patiently awaiting my attention. Leaning down to me, he quietly confessed that he had read ahead and had finished the novel, and then he shared with me a moment in which he became the expert: "The courthouse scene at the end of *Wish You Well* reminds me of Atticus and Mr. Gilmer and the jury in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I noticed that and I think it's kinda cool. Don't you?" I was delighted. Richard had not

only connected with this novel personally, but he had also made a connection to another novel. Such text-to-self and text-to-text connections help readers engage in and better understand what they read.

## Building Statewide Momentum

Although gratified by the students' demonstrated growth as successful readers, we still needed to build statewide momentum for the literacy initiative. Realizing that change, at first, is about building a bridge between dreams and reality, we reached out to educators who, like us, believe in the power of reading. We knew that teachers, despite being challenged by curriculums that had already been written and photocopied and English department budgets that were already strained, would embrace this project.

Following months of planning, the first annual RARI Educator's Conference drew readers from every segment of the population, including Rhode Island's lieutenant governor and the commissioner of elementary and secondary education. The conference affirmed the democratic underpinnings of literacy and the importance of community. David Baldacci graciously and generously agreed to be the keynote speaker at the conference and to make multiple visits to Rhode Island supporting his commitment to literacy. For the weeks following the conference, schools, libraries, local businesses, bookstores, and the media scheduled public events to discuss the book, including read-a-thons, book talks, and cultural exhibits.

David Baldacci's presence created moments of incredible magic for educators, students, and readers from all over Rhode Island. During the conference, multidisciplinary workshops, one of which featured the students, demonstrated strategies and resources for supporting the reading of *Wish You Well* in a variety of learning environments. (More information about the conference and other events is available at <http://www.readingacrossri.org/about.htm>.)

For our conference workshop, Visual Connections with *Wish You Well*, students from our two high schools who shared the common reading experience converged and presented a visual tour de force based

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on their impressions. Meanwhile, student-created CDs played soft odes to Appalachia and the novel, and student exemplars—movie posters; book jackets; quilts; sculptures; life-size renderings of characters with supporting text; and a lone, gaily-wrapped birthday present for a character—ringed the room in a colorful exhibition.

Having learned of the students' participation in our workshop and intrigued by the notion of hearing and seeing *their* work, David Baldacci quietly

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slipped into the room just as the workshop began. As an awareness of his presence spread through the room, the adults were astir with curiosity and awe, but the students remained focused and assured, tacitly welcoming the opportunity to have their work become performance art for an audience

that just happened to include the author. They already owned the text, so presenting for an adult audience was a natural extension of their sense of ownership. The students' pride in their literary achievement was clearly evident and well deserved; our pride in the students was beyond measure.

David Baldacci was visibly moved by all of the students' presentations, but perhaps it was Richard's choice of a gift celebrating a character's birthday that best melded the relationship between the story, the reader, and the author. Lumbering across the room, awkwardly balancing the gaily wrapped package, Richard tenderly offered the gift to Mr. Baldacci. The room fell silent in anticipation of Richard's moment. Tucked into the box was a simple gift for Oz's birthday, a worn and lovingly used baseball glove, meant to replace Oz's glove, which Oz had relinquished at McKenzie's Mercantile in trade for a desperately needed new barn. In his writing journal, Richard later reflected on his choice:

The reason that I picked Oz to have the biggest present was because he gave up the most. Both him [*sic*] and his sister gave up something for the wishing well, but Oz gave up something bigger. He gave up his heart. Playing baseball is what he loved to do. He did it in his spare time and every chance that he had. When I gave Oz's present to Mr. Baldacci, I was delighted and it meant a lot to me. Oz gave up what meant the most to him. The glove was what

meant the most to him. That was his pride and his joy. So I was obligated to make it Oz's birthday gift.

What transpired between David Baldacci and Richard was an exchange that more clearly evidenced Richard's achievement as a reader than any state-mandated assessment could possibly measure: Richard, now the expert, explained to the author what it meant to experience the story of Lou, Oz, and Diamond. In halting phrases rough-hewn as the unrelenting landscape that shapes *Wish You Well's* characters, Richard became the author of his own story and, by doing so, Mr. Baldacci became the reader of the text. Later, David Baldacci remarked to us, "When Richard handed me that battered, yet much-loved baseball glove, I knew that the book had connected with him. . . . I will cherish that moment forever." Through Richard's eyes, the author of the novel was reintroduced to his own characters and their potential to touch each reader's soul.

Following the workshop, David Baldacci met privately with the students to field questions and comments. In a reflective letter, Nate highlighted a specific moment during this private meeting:

Both . . . the conference and the presentations were enjoyable, however, I believe the meeting we conducted with you personally was the most enjoyable part. I thought that your beliefs in capitalism and the many "George Davis" capitalists were very profound, especially in the book. I also understand the whole concept behind the death of Diamond and the life of Davis. . . . I also enjoyed your information on writing, especially with actually creating characters with personalities, histories, and desires, thus making them exist not only on paper, but also in the reader's soul.

## The Next Book

After Reading Across Rhode Island's formal event schedule concluded in early May 2003, I returned to my daily routine, seeing anew that each school morning begins with the same mixture of chaos and promise: Stale air rushes to escape the building as the main doors open, spilled coffee ripples across the hallway floor, swinging backpacks threaten unwitting victims while locker doors fly open as students indulge in their morning rituals with reckless haste. School mornings are filled with few surprises, but one Monday students sleepily drifted apart, reveal-

ing one student thoroughly absorbed and seemingly oblivious to the surrounding confusion. Richard, the six-foot-three consummate athlete and star football player, was leaning against several locker doors, a book cradled in his hands as if it were a game-winning touchdown pass.

In my surprise, I blurted out, “Richard! What are you doing?”

“Reading,” came his startled response.

“Reading what?”

“The book Mr. Baldacci sent me, *The Winner*.”

Enthusiastically, Richard continued, “It’s really good. Did you read it?”

I sheepishly mumbled, “No.”

Richard sighed and said, “You should. We could talk about it.”

For *each* of us, membership in the literacy club has its own rewards.

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The English department chair at Exeter–West Greenwich Junior/Senior High in West Greenwich, Rhode Island, **Anne J. Arvidson** is a National Writing Project fellow. *email*: Annejarvidson@cox.net. **Pamela Blanco** teaches secondary English at Coventry High School in Coventry, Rhode Island, and is also a National Writing Project fellow. *email*: sherm2@cox.net.