



EVANSTON, ILL.

Children need to see themselves in books. Enter Young, Black & Lit.

By Anne Stein / Contributor

Krenice Ramsey was a self-described book nerd growing up in Evanston, Illinois.

“I always had a book in my hand,” says Ms. Ramsey, an attorney at the Chicago office of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. “I loved reading anything and everything, and I continue to love books.”

Five years ago she was hunting for a gift – a book, of course – for her young niece Kalaya. But even in a big-box bookstore in suburban Chicago, she couldn’t find children’s offerings with young Black girls as the main character. “I was really struggling to find books that were culturally relevant and had characters that looked like and spoke like and had similar experiences to her,” she says.

After coming up short, she spent more time searching, found a few books online, and donated them to an Evanston community center. At the time, she was dating her now-husband, Derrick Ramsey, and he suggested she give books, about boys this time, to an Evanston barbershop.

“Folks responded, and the more we talked about it,” Ms. Ramsey says, “the more we realized that this might be a much bigger idea, so we grew it from there.”

In 2018, the two co-founded Young, Black & Lit, a nonprofit whose mission is to provide new fiction and nonfiction books featuring people who are Black to schools and youth organizations across the United States. Since its inception, the group has distributed more than 75,000 books.

“We want Black children to think about being all the great things they can be in life,” says Mr. Ramsey, who works in financial services. “When you don’t have a bunch of positive Black representation in the media, books can be a simple way to provide a view of life and opportunities, and seeing that is

important.”

Given the current environment, he says, which includes “efforts to ban books telling Black stories and [to] diminish Black history,” the pair’s effort at increased access for young people “is even more important.”

“Books are a luxury”

As the couple’s relationship evolved, so did Young, Black & Lit, which initially started in Ms. Ramsey’s Chicago apartment. The two have since married, become parents to a toddler, and moved back to Ms. Ramsey’s hometown of Evanston, where the organization has an office.

In 2018, the two were distributing about 50 books a month aimed at children in pre-K through eighth grade. Today Young, Black & Lit gives away 3,000 books monthly nationwide – many to groups that help low-income children. The effort is funded by grants, partnerships, and individual donations. Books have gone to libraries, church

camp, Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops, doctor’s offices, and back-to-school fairs.

“I grew up reading books, and in our house we have dozens of books, but in low-income communities, books are a luxury,” explains Mr. Ramsey,

who hails from Detroit and was a big fan of the “Goosebumps” series as a kid.

For older middle schoolers, says Ms. Ramsey, books tackle some complicated topics: about historical Black figures, about grief and empowerment, and about everyday life experiences, such as visiting with grandparents or playing with a snail in the backyard.

“Our stories aren’t monolithic,” she says. “They also expand the mind and give you language to express what you are experiencing.”

One of the organization’s first partners was Evanston’s Oakton Elementary School, which has a population that generally includes about 43% Black, 26% Hispanic, and



PHOTOS BY MONTY GEORGE

24% white students. Every child in kindergarten through second grade received two to three books a month to take home and keep.

“It was a year before the pandemic, and it was transformative,” says former Oakton Elementary Principal Michael Allen. “It allowed children to build their home library.

“I saw improved self-esteem among Black students,” says Dr. Allen, who adds that the books are equally valuable for all students. “The books helped defy stereotypes and helped children develop an appreciation for other cultures. If students don’t have authentic perspectives on other cultures, when they go out in the world and just have stereotypes, it puts them at a great disadvantage.”

Carrie Swan teaches fourth grade and Louise Rizio teaches fifth at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Literary and Fine Arts School in Evanston. Each year, the educators re-

LIT LEADERS: Derrick (photo above, at left) and Krenice Ramsey, co-founders of Young, Black & Lit, are surrounded by books in their Evanston, Illinois, office. This year marks the fifth anniversary of the organization, which plans to give away some 30,000 books in 2023. Biographies about athletes, musicians, a civil rights activist, and a Supreme Court justice (photo right) are among the books that Young, Black & Lit offers young people.



ceive books from Young, Black & Lit for their classroom libraries.

“When I first started teaching 14 years ago, it was difficult to find children’s books with a child of color as the main charac-

ter,” Ms. Rizio says. “I didn’t think of this metaphor but it really sums it up: Everyone should be able to pick up a book and have a doorway into another culture, or a mirror reflecting their own culture.”

“It builds empathy in children to read about different kids who have different experiences,” adds Ms. Swan. “It might make them think differently when they engage with other humans, and that’s a powerful thing that books can do.”

To get any kind of free book is a gift, says Ms. Rizio, “so to get these books that celebrate diversity is a treasure.”

A milestone year

To mark its fifth anniversary this year, Young, Black & Lit is putting 200 books in every Evanston elementary and middle school, and is also piloting the Direct to Home Lit Year Program. Up to 200 Evanston kindergartners through third graders who sign up will get 15 age-appropriate books for free, mailed to their homes.

The organization is also providing books to every Reach Out and Read site in Illinois. The nationwide program allows doctors (usually pediatricians) to give a book to every child at their well-visit appointment.

“They are absolutely beautiful books, and the kids love them,” says Brooke Turnock, a pediatrician at a community health center on Chicago’s West Side. “I have kids who come in and ask me for a book, not a sucker!” Dr. Turnock has practiced medicine for 18 years and heads Reach Out and Read at her clinic.

“The concept of seeing yourself in a story can help the child develop a love of reading, and that’s key to neurologic and literacy development,” she says. “In the areas we serve, which are mostly low-income, a lot of the parents want their children to be highly educated but don’t know where to start or don’t have funds to purchase books.”

In the future, says Mr. Ramsey, Young, Black & Lit would like to be able to put books into the home of every child who wants to understand the Black experience, and to build home

libraries for every kid across the country. “For me, for both of us, this doesn’t feel like work,” says Mr. Ramsey. “We know we’re positively impacting some person or community. It’s a labor of love.”