

## Book by Book

By Jeanne Mayer

During the 2015/2016 school year, I volunteered as a reading-buddy for four second-grade girls who read far below grade level. Twice a week, I sat with them for 30-minute sessions in the cafeteria at their elementary school on the West Side of Chicago. All four girls were adorable and serious about reading, but I had a favorite little buddy. Her name was Sunny.

Sunny was tall for her age and always wore a dress or jumper with a crisp white blouse, black patent-leather shoes, and white socks. Her braided hair was secured with white barrettes. From the first day we met, Sunny would neither make eye contact nor greet me. She would hesitate at the cafeteria entrance, her eyes scanning the room. When she spotted me, she would walk to our table, plop down onto the bench next to me, open the first book on the stack, and start reading.

“Did Sunny not trust me?” I wondered. “Or was she shy? Would this hinder her progress?”

After many weeks, Sunny entered the cafeteria with a briskness to her walk. She greeted me with a smile and made eye contact. Sunny talked about the books she read and even about her favorite Thanksgiving food.

By early spring, Sunny’s reading test score showed grade level. She met my praise of her efforts with a smile and a twinkle in her eyes. “Have I earned her trust?” I wondered.

That hard-earned trust was broken one week when I had forgotten to tell her of my absence for the next week. On my return, she headed straight for the book table, selected a stack of books, and plopped them on our table. She read book after book ignoring me. When the session ended, she stood up, with her hands on her hips, looked into my eyes, and said, “So, I suppose you’re not coming on Thursday?”

Sunny tested above grade level by the end of the school year. Her thank-you card said, “I like you so much. You are the best buddy ever. Love, Sunny.”

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May 2022

*Editor’s Note: Jeanne was a tutor with Open Books for schools (elementary through 12th grade). The organization trains volunteers; learn more on its website, <https://www.open-books.org/>*