

Extraordinary Life

Christine Alexander Founded New Haven Reads

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Chris Alexander was the kind of person who saw a need and quietly went about filling it. She was extremely modest but driven by a determination to improve the world around her.

She was born Dec. 13, 1944, to Duke Nicoll, who ran a moving company in Colorado Springs, and his wife Jane, a homemaker. She had a brother, who predeceased her, as well as a sister.

At Duke University, where she majored in history, she met Bruce Alexander, a Yale graduate who was studying law. They married in 1968 and were among the first people to join VISTA, created as a domestic Peace Corps program by former President John F. Kennedy. The couple were assigned to Washington, D.C., where Bruce worked in a pre-trial diversion program with young people, and Chris helped students in the program obtain their graduate equivalency diploma. If the young people found jobs and earned a diploma, charges against them would be dropped.

After their assignment, they moved to Columbia, Md., where Bruce began a 25-year career with real estate developer James Rouse.

Chris' interest in children grew, and she obtained a nursing degree and worked at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine for Dr. Bob Wood in the pediatric allergy and immunology department, doing research on childhood asthma. Families were sometimes reluctant to allow their children to participate in research studies because there were many unknowns and possible drug reactions. But Chris had an ability to connect with families, many of whom were low-income.

"She had a way of really making them feel comfortable," said Wood, department director. "She was an incredibly warm, intelligent, engaging person."

In 1998, the family moved to New Haven, where Bruce became vice president for New Haven and state affairs at Yale. Chris, who had always been interested in education and literacy, was searching for something to do, and decided to organize a book drive. She found a space in the Chapel Square Mall in downtown New Haven, and donations grew. Though the mall was not a place where her friends shopped, it became a destination. Publishers would send her their overruns, and the inventory continued to increase. She gave the books to anyone, including schools. One day, a family asked for help teaching their child reading.

That one student turned into dozens, and then hundreds as Chris enlisted anyone and everyone to help. "Every cocktail party at Yale, we'd sign someone up to tutor," said Bruce.

Their house and their basement filled with books, and space to tutor became the top priority. The program, called New Haven Reads, with Alexander as the unpaid executive director, moved several times as demand for tutoring grew.

Bruce Alexander persuaded Yale to provide space for the program, and there are now two locations in the Dixwell neighborhood and one at Science Park, where there is also an adult program with Literacy Volunteers. The free bookstore is still a draw – anyone can take up to five books at a time.

Today, 350 volunteers tutor 478 children a week. The tutors are made up of Yale students, senior citizens, teachers, parents and teens. There is a writing club on Fridays, as well as a Scrabble and a chess club. There is a kindergarten literacy camp and an SAT prep class.

"Chris started this with a tiny vision," said Tanya Smith, in charge of education and parent liaison. "We do an assessment, and go on from there. Our goal is to get the kids through high school and college."

The program now has a staff of 10 and an annual budget of \$200,000, which is used for salaries, computers and books. Because of Yale's involvement, there is no rent. A year ago, it received a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education, but that grant is running out.

Tutoring is usually once a week – one requirement is that a parent must bring the child and remain during the session, and some families take buses across town to get there. In 2008, Alexander was one of two recipients of the national United Way of America Volunteer of the Year Award, and that same year, she and Bruce received the Greater New Haven United Way DeTocqueville Award.

The largest problem the program faces is lack of space – the program, which runs five afternoons a week as well as Saturday afternoons, has outgrown its three locations and there are nearly 300 children on the waiting list, even though the program is known only through word of mouth.

Alexander's goal was ambitious: achieving 100 percent literacy in New Haven.

"She felt every child, every family, deserved that chance," said Smith. "She was selfless. 'How can we help this child?' She didn't give much thought to how much it would cost."

Alexander's single-minded commitment was contagious. Volunteers evolved into staff members. Kirsten Levinsohn was intrigued from her first visit and became co-executive director.

"The key to our success is that it's a one-on-one relationship," she said. "There is a deep bond that forms – it's hard to measure the effect. We provide emotional support as well as educational support."

Staff member Catherine Strickland learned a lot from Alexander. "It's really important to thank people constantly," she said. "People really appreciate that... I've learned about what it truly means to serve the community."

One of the students who is feeling Alexander's loss is Melba Flores, 14, who encountered "Miss Chris" when she was failing second grade. Melba is now in 10th grade and getting all A's in English. Her little sister and mother are receiving help from the program, and she is a tutor herself.

"I feel like I'm giving back to the community, seeing the little kids, how they struggle," said Melba. "They remind me of when I was little."

Alexander was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer 10 years ago, but continued to work until this spring. She had two sons and four grandchildren. She enjoyed Pilates, and she knit baby blankets for all staff babies. Though humble and unconcerned with frivolous extras, Alexander was direct and no nonsense.

"There was no false sophistication," said Paulette Kessler, a friend who has now moved to San Francisco. Some years ago, Alexander was interested in taking a painting class and talked a reluctant Kessler into accompanying her.

"It was hard to say no to Chris," said Kessler, who continues to paint. About 10 years ago, Alexander was in a serious car accident and approached recovery with the same determination as she fought cancer and built New Haven Reads. "She didn't tolerate people who didn't pull their weight, because she always did," said Kessler.

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