



Forest Of Reading



History of the Forest

The Context —

In the 1960s and into the 1970s, there were a myriad of library programs being offered that supported recreational reading activities. Teacher-Librarians regularly met with young readers who craved new materials to recommend classic and new titles.

In the 1980s, there was mounting pressure for school library collections to support curriculum interests. This led to a growing focus on teaching research skills. As a result, reading programs took on less importance.

OLA's Involvement —

In the early 1990s, the Ontario Library Association (OLA) conducted a small survey about programs being offered by school libraries. The results were shocking. Only a handful of general reading programs were still taking place in schools.

OLA's Executive Director at the time, Larry Moore, was shocked. He was a great believer in the importance of developing a lifelong habit of reading for pleasure. Having been a secondary school librarian, he knew how readers could get wrapped up in their reading and how it spurred their abilities in general. His deputy, Jefferson Gilbert, had not been a reader as a young person, but was impressed by the discussions of the problem at hand.

Unexpected Catalyst —

Moore and Gilbert did a lot of travelling to observe other associations and their program ideas. In 1993, they went to San Antonio, Texas to the Texas Library Association (TLA) conference to better understand how TLA had built their conference and membership into the largest state-level library association in North America.

Texas was remarkably similar to Ontario: it had huge geographic area with large cities spaced out, there were similar numbers of school boards, schools and libraries, and the demographics were alike.

Over the course of their time in San Antonio, Moore and Gilbert observed that TLA clearly thrived on the large involvement of its teacher-librarians. At the heart of this involvement was a near-compulsory Grade 4 to 6 reading program called the Texas Bluebonnet Awards. Each year, schools were given a list of book titles for children to read and to vote on for their favourite book. The program was hard to ignore given the central place author autographing took in the mammoth exhibit. There was also a booth selling support materials from videos and promotion ideas to the books themselves.

The final luncheon at the TLA conference to announce the results of the childrens' vote was sold out. While their trip was to assess the membership and program of TLA, Moore and Gilbert were took away an idea for a program that could be modelled, adapted, and introduced in Canada.

Thoughts and Considerations

While the 1,000-plus luncheon was sold out, it was observed that those in attendance were adults—not kids. Moore and Gilbert scoured the TLA conference for everything they could learn. It became clear that as good as the Bluebonnet program was, there was much more that could be done in Ontario to make the program and its reader involvement unique.

On the trip back to Toronto, the possibilities were explored. The principal mission of the program was to re-stimulate school library interest in reading through the promotion of reading for pleasure. Moore and Gilbert could see that a program could provide a focus on Canadian books – teaching a new generation about Canadian authors, illustrators and publishers—even Canadian culture itself.

To give control to the kids, roles were suggested for a formal, secret, “municipal-style” vote, where the children became scrutinizers controlling the balloting through to the tallying and presenting of results. Moore and Gilbert could see that the ceremonies, where the awards would be given, could be run by the kids, from hosting to presenting.

A full-blown proposal for a Grades 4-6 reading program describing these possibilities was taken to the OLA’s Libraries Advance Ontario Committee for consideration. This group embraced the proposal immediately. Among its many champions were Chair Paula deRonde, past OLA President, Allison Craig, a teacher-librarian from Ottawa and OLA President-elect, and Linda Helson, the Ontario School Library Association’s President. The Committee refined the ideas in the proposal, adding their own for a program kit for teacher-librarians. The first list of fiction and non-fiction titles (the Texas Bluebonnet Awards were only fiction) with a host of promotion ideas were delivered in pre-stuffed file folders—“instant programs” for teacher-librarians who no longer had time to develop materials on their own.

In the spring of 1994, the Silver Birch Award program was under way. The Forest of Reading was born. Over the coming months, Gilbert would refine a business model for the new program and Moore would develop an organizational structure and commitment that would eventually involve hundreds of volunteers.

The Unexpected Ramifications —

As the program gained traction, the Silver Birch Award started to attract the attention of principals and teachers who encouraged its adoption in ever-widening circles, providing teacher-librarians with the support they needed—in many cases, without having to take the initiative.

Five years later, a program for Grades 7-9 would be built in response to school demand for it – the Red Maple Award program, the second tree in the Forest of Reading.

Since then, many programs have been added to fill in the age gaps: Blue Spruce for the junior kindergarten to Grade 2 readers, the Silver Birch Express program for Grade 3 to 4 readers, and the White Pine program for high school readers. In 2009, a French language program was added (Tamarac), and in 2013, a French language picture book program began (Peuplier). As the program gained strength and growth each year, it is now run in libraries and schools across Canada and the world.



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Forest Rebrand

In 2018, the Forest of Reading was selected by a pro bono agency, the Brandvan Initiative, to receive branding development and advice. While the initial idea was to rebrand the Festival of Trees, the Forest of Reading's annual celebration event, it became clear that an overhaul of the Forest of Reading's brand was needed.

And in 2019, the Forest of Reading's new brand was unveiled with a sharp, clean look. The Forest, the Festival, and each award logo was redesigned so everything came under the umbrella of the Forest. During this rebrand, there were also changes to the reading programs: the two non-fiction programs — Silver Birch and Red Maple — were consolidated into the Yellow Cedar Award and the Tamrac Express program was renamed to Méléze.

Today, there are ten reading programs in the Forest, covering all English-language age groups from pre-schoolers to adult readers.