

Shumaker law firm aims to help 1 million people learn to read

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BY JAMES TRUMM / BLADE BUSINESS WRITER



Associate Jack Kelly and partner Sharon Fulop at Shumaker Law Firm in Toledo on Monday.

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As Shumaker marks its 100th anniversary, the Toledo law firm plans to celebrate by helping 1 million people learn to read.

Though these plans might surprise those who expect a law firm to confine its charitable donations to law-related endeavors, Shumaker's leaders see promoting literacy as a logical adjunct to their profession.

"As lawyers, we know the power of words and want to empower others by giving them the power of words," said Jennifer Compton, the firm's managing partner.

Attorney Sharon Fulop, one of the firm's partners, affirms the importance of literacy to lawyers and their clients.

"We are constantly reading, whether you're an associate or a senior partner," she said. "You're learning how to communicate. It was natural for us to support learning to read."

Shumaker's Make a Difference Through Literacy initiative originally aimed to improve the reading skills of more than 100,000 people by 2025 as part of the firm's centennial celebration.

But the firm outperformed its own expectations; the program reached more than 175,000 people by the end of 2024.

Its success prompted the firm to up its goal by a factor of 10. The initiative now aims to reach more than 1 million people who are struggling with reading and writing. The firm has also funded literacy efforts that include reading buddies, book deliveries, homework helpers, tutoring, book fairs, and the creation of free libraries in public parks.

One of the local beneficiaries of Shumaker's literacy initiative is a summer program called Brain Gain, which is run by the Boys & Girls Club of Toledo. The project focuses on combating the "brain drain" that sometimes happens to young students over the summer months. Each week, the program picks a children's book — often a Newbery or Caldecott winner — to read with students involved in the program.

As part of the firm's local efforts to promote reading, it also made a \$5,000 donation to TutorSmart, which programs tutoring for students in Toledo Public Schools. TutorSmart doesn't provide tutoring itself, but is a data-driven evaluator of student performance that creates programs that help students to learn to read better.

One of the firm's associates, Jack Kelly, who was a middle school teacher before becoming an attorney, is on the board of TutorSmart. He sees direct connections among reading, writing, and the practice of law.

"You can't be a good writer unless you're a good reader," he said. "As lawyers, we represent our clients using the written word. And writing skills develop together with your reading skills."

TutorSmart's director of advancement, Hyfah Hilou, is grateful for Shumaker's support.

"Their generous contribution has been instrumental in supporting the programs that our literacy coaches and local tutors use," she said. "Our targeted data-driven tutoring helps students attain grade-level proficiency in reading."

Shumaker, formerly known as Shumaker, Loop & Kendrick, employs more than 600 people and has offices in Toledo, Akron, Columbus, Charlotte, Charleston, S.C., Minneapolis, Greenville, S.C., Sarasota, Fla., Dade City, Fla., St. Petersburg, Fla., Tallahassee, Tampa, and Washington.

The firm has also funded a "little free library" in a Wood County neighborhood, a donation to the Toledo Public Schools Foundation, and the Rossford Schools Canine Crew Literacy Program.

Ms. Compton said that the cash budget for the overall literacy project is \$250,000, but that the firm donates a lot of time and effort as well.

"We don't want to just write checks," Ms. Compton said. "We challenge our people to get out and do something."

The firm offers its nonlawyer employees two days of paid time off for public service and encourages them to use that time in promoting literacy. It also asks its clients to bring book donations with them when they come in for meetings.

Shumaker's literacy program is not just for children.

"We do a lot with adult literacy, especially in Ohio and North Carolina," Ms. Compton said. "We also participate in ESL programs."

The need is clearly there. According to the National Literacy Institute, 54 percent of U.S. adults have a literacy below the sixth-grade level, and 45 million are functionally illiterate and read below a fifth-grade level. Forty-four percent of American adults have not read a book in a year.

Although Ms. Compton acknowledges that improving the literacy of 1 million people is an ambitious goal, she now expects the firm to exceed that number.

Ms. Fulop was even more emphatic.

"We will absolutely hit 1 million," she said, "but it's important to get the word out, because if there is some organization that is struggling with funding and works in literacy, they should know about us. We'd like to get to know them."

Being lawyers and attentive to issues of verisimilitude, the firm carefully counts the number of people its literacy programs affect.

"Dream it, do it, and document it," Ms. Compton said. "That's what we do."