

Results Count to Rales

Potomac couple funds tutoring program in county schools.

[By Ken Millstone/The Almanac](#)

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Josh Rales has a down-to-business attitude toward philanthropy. The Potomac attorney and businessman made his fortune in the real estate boom of the last ten years. And as the chief, along with wife Debby Rales, of the Rales Family Institute Foundation, which donates to health care, social service, and education causes, he has a nose for programs that get the job done.

"We really look for first-rate opportunities," Josh Rales said. "We want to get a return, we want to get results. You want to know that your hard earned dollar is being invested wisely."

The Rales have no doubt about the institute's current endeavor, The Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network, named in honor of Josh Rales' late mother. The program aims to close the minority achievement gap in Montgomery County Public Schools through targeted, one-on-one reading tutoring.

Rolled out last fall, the program is currently serving 575 second-grade students in more than 30 county schools, primarily schools with large numbers of poor students. When schools open next fall, organizers hope the program will reach 840 children in 45 schools and have more than 500 volunteers.

"My dad grew up in an orphanage on the upper-west side of New York City. His mother died in childbirth. It was the depression era and the father was scrambling just to survive. My mom understood that knowledge is power and that the best path to knowledge is through reading," Josh Rales said of the program's namesake. Ruth Rales died of breast cancer last year. Josh Rales grew up in Pittsburgh and came to the Washington area in the late 1960s.

Both Josh and Debby Rales are products of the Montgomery County School system — Josh Rales graduated from Walt Whitman High School and Debby Rales from Albert Einstein High in Kensington. In investigating charitable opportunities during the spring of last year, they met with MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast "I quickly became convinced that if we were going to bet on someone, this was a guy we were going to bet on. It's like betting on Secretariat," Josh Rales said. Weast, whose lower class size and all-day kindergarten initiatives have centered on closing the achievement gap, talked about a program he had introduced as a superintendent in Greensboro, North Carolina before he came to MCPS. The program, Reading 2gether, which began in Israel, was started to help assimilate Ethiopian Jewish immigrants that didn't read Hebrew. The Rales were impressed. They offered \$90,000 a year for three years to get the program started in Montgomery County. The County contributed \$100,000 to pay for community outreach coordinators who would target minority communities. In later meetings, the organizers drew in Comcast Cable, which has donated airtime for public service announcements promoting the program and soliciting volunteers. The announcements are set to start airing next month.

Students in the program are competent readers, but they need a boost, Weast said. "To do the work of the 21st century you have to not only be quick at it — fluency — but you have to comprehend it very quickly. ... That is best accomplished through a tutoring program."

"This particular program ... works," said Weast. "We are able to demonstrate the results on this one more because we put in an accountability system," that tracks students' performance from the time they start the tutoring. "It really makes significant difference in kids' lives."

"This program works. It's worked everywhere it's been tried, it's worked here on a pilot basis. We just

Get Involved

To volunteer to tutor students as part of the Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Initiative, call the program's dedicated volunteer hotline: 301-279-3890.

Photo by Ken

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Josh and Debby Rales are the donors behind the Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network, which focuses on closing the elementary school achievement gap through one-on-one reading tutoring.

need to ramp it up. And the key is to get volunteers,” said County Councilmember Steve Silverman (D-At Large), who worked get the program off the ground.

So far, 340 community members, 130 parents, and 110 fifth-grade students have donated one hour per week to work with second-graders lagging behind in reading. The tutors read to the students, assist the students in a first and second reading, and discuss the content of the passage. They also keep logs of the students’ strengths and weaknesses, which are shared with the schools’ teachers and reading specialists, and communicate with the students’ parents. Among the tutors are Silverman and Debby Rales.

“We don’t want to just talk the talk. We want to walk the walk,” Debby Rales said. Anyone can put checks in the mail and do nothing to participate in the initiatives they fund, she and Josh Rales said. “It’s getting your hands dirty. And we really like to get involved, not just financially but emotionally.” “[Josh Rales has] got tremendous commitment, both him and Debby, and this is a tangible way for them to make a contribution,” Silverman said. “There are a lot of nice guys out there, the question is whether they commit to supporting a program as opposed to just writing checks. ... He wanted to be convinced that this was the most bang for the buck.”

Josh Rales said its too early to look beyond the three years for which the program is funded., but noted, “If we see great returns, why wouldn’t we want to compound them?” In the meantime, he’s focused on bringing the program up to full speed—and full enrollment—by fall. “We hope for a full enrollment of volunteers and we hope to make significant progress closing the achievement gap and making a personal difference in the lives of these children,” he said.