

# Giving Orlando Youth a Creative Voice

Julia Young, founder of the Page 15 creative literacy program, uses an unexpected second chance to share her first love with Orlando youth.

By Cris Phillips-Georg

When the economy first started showing signs of distress, long-time Orlando resident **Julia Young** was one of its first casualties. Laid off from a local real estate marketing and development firm, Young was left wondering what to do next. As she began thinking about how to get back on her feet, a surprising thought occurred to her—this career obstacle might actually be a career opportunity in disguise, an opportunity to change career paths entirely and finally make good on an endeavor she had always dreamed about.

“I was almost embarrassed to tell people about it at first,” says Young. “It was just so far off the path I had been on. And yet, there was this incredible pull to give it a try. I couldn’t shake it. So, I made the leap.” In 2008, Young founded Page 15, an Orlando-based, nonprofit youth literacy organization that provides supplemental reading, writing and tutoring programs that improve literacy, encourage creative expression, and inspire a lifelong passion for language arts. Different from your average tutoring program, which focuses only on homework completion toward the singular goal of improved academic performance and better grades, Page 15 goes further by also offering a wealth of fun, innovative programs and summer camps designed to introduce youth to careers in the literacy arts and to help youth find their voice through creative written expression.

Breathing life into Page 15 proved to be quite an undertaking with some very sobering realities. “In the beginning,” says Young, “this project was all about fun. I have a real passion for reading and writing, and helping to ignite that passion in children just seemed like the best, most fun thing in the world.” However, as Young began researching local statistics to substantiate the need for her program, she stumbled upon Orlando’s dismally low youth literacy rates. Per 2007 Orange County FCAT scores: 35 percent of 4th grade students, 53 percent of 8th grade students, and a staggering 78 percent of 10th grade students read below basic proficiency



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Julia Young assists Page 15 participant Kyra (6) with a creative writing project.

level—statistics that each jump by 10 percent or more for African-American, Latino, and low-income youth. “I was stunned! I thought, ‘oh my gosh, we are really in trouble here.’ And the weight of what I was doing really settled in on my shoulders.” Young says it was at this point that her big idea transformed from a fun project into a serious mission.



Julia Young with Page 15 Young Writers Camp participant Jasmine (7) at Urban Think bookstore.

Young went to multiple cities around the country to see other highly effective creative literacy programs in action. She gleaned the secrets of their success and brought that wisdom back here to Orlando. She met with key city officials to determine how her program could best address the community's specific youth literacy needs in an impactful way. The low-income, minority neighborhood of Parramore was most in need of immediate help. So Young partnered with the leaders behind the Parramore Kidz Zone and got to work. The positive impact of her program was evident almost immediately. "I have seen even the most hard core book-haters completely turn around at Page 15 in only one week," says Lisa Early, director of Orlando's Families, Parks and Recreation Department and the program director of Parramore Kidz Zone. "Julia and her team are successful because they nurture the seed of innate creativity in each child and make each kid feel like someone cares about them. Page 15 keeps kids from the hopelessness and anger they might feel if they were trapped in a seemingly unstoppable downward spiral in school."

In its inaugural year, the free after-school program saw impressive growth, starting with a small handful of kids and expanding to more than 200 visits per month to its drop-in tutoring program alone. "It has been a whirlwind first year," Young says. "The community and the kids have all responded really well to our programs. I'm so humbled and energized by that." But despite the program's clear potential to positively impact youth literacy rates, Young asserts that igniting a passion for reading and writing and ultimately connecting a child to his or her creative voice is still at the heart of her mission. As for what keeps Young motivated, she says: "Sure, I maxed out my credit cards getting this organization off the ground. But when I have a teen tell me that she looks at a story she wrote in our program, bound and sitting on her bookshelf side by side with 'real books' by 'real authors' and now feels because of that she can accomplish anything. Well, that keeps me motivated every day. The feeling I get from a moment like that is just priceless." **L**

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To find out more about where the name Page 15 came from visit [CentralFlorida-Lifestyle.com](http://CentralFlorida-Lifestyle.com).