



# “A Deep Passion for Reading and Writing”

An Interview with Lena Townsend

The Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF), which published *Afterschool Matters* from 2003 to 2008 and continues to fund the journal and related projects, is closing in December. We sat down with Lena Townsend, executive director, to talk about RBF’s legacy and continuing influence on literacy work in afterschool programs.

**Afterschool Matters:** How did you get started in youth work?

**Lena Townsend:** Actually, I got started with reading. I love to read! In high school, after I’d taken all the English electives, my teacher asked me to tutor a student named David in reading. The materials they used with these students who had difficulty reading—well, even I thought they were boring. So David brought in the newspaper, and we read the sports together. That’s where I realized that I wanted to be a reading specialist, though I didn’t know that was the name of it.

So I went to New York University in early childhood and elementary education, which was how you learned

Robert Bowne Foundation staff, past and present. Back: Karen Valen, Sara Hill, Anne Lawrence. Front: Lena Townsend, Dianne Kangisser.

to teach reading at that time. It was an amazing program, way ahead of its time. I learned so much.

And then I fell into doing adult literacy education. I cobbled together adult ed jobs in community-based organizations, Bronx Community College, and the New York Public Library’s Centers for Reading and Writing. Finally I landed a full-time job with the Institute for Literacy Studies (ILS) at Lehman College. I stayed there for 12 years, teaching, doing professional development around authentic literacy work with youth practitioners and adult educators, learning about inquiry.

**ASM:** So you took this passion for reading with you to the Robert Bowne Foundation.

**Lena:** Yes, but remember that literacy was the foundation’s passion from the beginning. Ted [Edmund A. Stanley, Jr.] founded RBF to fund youth programs. He was funding Boys & Girls Clubs, Scouts, whatever he could find. But the story goes that he heard about a newspaper called *40 Acres and a Mule*, so he walked into this Harlem storefront and offered the guy a grant for his work with young people. And that was the beginning of the focus on literacy.

Then when Ted hired Dianne Kangisser [as executive director in 1983], she really solidified the connection between

youth development and literacy. There weren't any people or organizations doing professional development for out-of-school practitioners. So Dianne brought together a group of adult educators talking about afterschool as a field in its own right—a "third space," along with family and school, that nurtures children's development. Dianne helped to focus the funding on organizations with deep roots in the community. That's when the foundation started showing those organizations how their own focus—art, dance, sports, activism, whatever—could also be used to expand children's literacy skills.

**ASM:** So how did you become executive director?

**Lena:** Dianne retired in 1999. I was recruited as part-time program officer, and in 2001 I became the foundation's first full-time executive director.

**ASM:** And you expanded the staff.

**Lena:** With the full support of the board, yes. First we looked for a full-time program officer, and that was Anne Lawrence. Sara Hill was brought on as research officer to further develop the journal and lead what would become the ASM Fellowship.

Anne, Sara, and I had been providing technical assistance and professional development for the RBF since the late 1980s. So Anne was very familiar with the programs, and now she had an opportunity to implement her ideas about intensive technical assistance and organization-wide capacity building. She developed programs like the Julia Palmer Library Development Grant and Literacy Support Project for afterschool programs.

Meanwhile Sara was doing the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship, which engages practitioners in reflective research and writing, and the Edmund A. Stanley, Jr., Research Grant. These two vehicles have made possible a lot of the work that has appeared in *Afterschool Matters* over the years.

**ASM:** And all three of you came out of adult education, didn't you? How did you make that transition?

**Lena:** Dianne too. We all came out of adult literacy work. I think for all of us it starts with a deep passion for reading and writing, and we'd all worked on integrating literacy in an authentic way and on inquiry work.

But the short answer to your question is the Bowne Professional Development Group, the group I mentioned before that Dianne started. From 1989 to about 1999, RBF funded this group of adult educators and literacy specialists who met monthly to learn about afterschool programs and issues. There weren't any articles for us to read about afterschool education specifically, so we read and discussed

research on issues that young people faced as they grew up as well as literacy development.

This group facilitated the first professional development workshops for out-of-school time staff and worked with OST managers to help them train their programs' staff. It was this incredible group of people doing exactly the kind of professional development RBF preaches: sustained inquiry with professional reading and reflection on practice that takes place in a learning community over time.

Anne, Sara, and I all came out of that group, as did a lot of other people who really formed the core of this new field called afterschool in New York City.

**ASM:** Speaking of not being able to find any articles—that's why you published *Afterschool Matters*?

**Lena:** Exactly. The journal actually was started by a couple of community-based organizations in the city whose directors were involved in the Professional Development Group, but they couldn't sustain it. We took over in 2003, and we published not only the journal but also a monograph series we called the Occasional Papers Series. Disseminating inquiry work and research-based best practices, especially work done by practitioners, was a natural part of the foundation's goal to improve afterschool education.

When NIOST took over [in 2008], in collaboration with the National Writing Project, we gained national distribution and greater visibility. One of the foundation's legacy gifts will be to continue to provide funding for *Afterschool Matters* for the next few years.

**ASM:** RBF has weathered a lot of changes in its 47 years. How did it manage to persist in the work?

**Lena:** We never lost sight of the vision to support and promote quality literacy development outside of school. Beginning in 2002, we focused on recruiting board members with experience in education with community-based organizations, adult literacy, and youth development—up to and including Jennifer Stanley, who replaced Ted as board president in 2001. She runs an afterschool program and summer camp in Maryland. The board's funding decisions always came down to how best to benefit programs. Even the spend-down we're doing now, getting ready to close our doors in December—it's all about how to benefit programs.

Also, we've gotten our grantees involved in our strategic planning, again including the spend-down plans. We believe in our grantee programs and in the work they're doing, and that's why we've never veered off course.

And I'll share one other thing that we've learned in the course of advising our grantees on sustainability—because, you know, we don't work only with the afterschool programs

of these multi-service community organizations we fund. We also help them work out issues in their parent organizations. And here's where RBF has been leading by example all these years: Our board picked staff with the right expertise and then let us make the day-to-day decisions rather than trying to micromanage. That's another reason we've been able to keep this work going.

**ASM:** What do you see as RBF's most significant contributions to the field?

**Lena:** Well, some of the things we've been talking about, plus a few more.

- **Long-term professional development.** In the mid-1990s, RBF funded ILS to do the Youth Practitioners Institute, a semester-long experiential course. That's the first long-term professional development in afterschool that we know of. The foundation also funded CLASP, Anne Lawrence's long-term afterschool professional development at the Literacy Assistance Center. More recently the Julia Palmer Library Development and Literacy Support Project has evolved into a yearlong program with monthly meetings and on-site support that foster action research on literacy and library development. Also, for the past 10 years, Anne and a colleague have facilitated quarterly networking meetings for practitioners to share best practices and questions. Topics are decided based on participant feedback. They've covered things like evaluation, family involvement, and working with young staff.
- **Afterschool Matters.** I mean the journal, of course, but, perhaps more importantly, the practitioner fellowship and writing that go along with it.
- **Advocacy.** As a result of our funding, New York City has 11 afterschool ambassadors who have been trained to speak with policy makers, put on events, work with community members—all the steps it takes to keep funding coming for this vital "third space" where we help children grow and flourish.
- **Evaluation.** This piece has been maybe the most challenging of all. As early as 1998, RBF funded an evaluation institute for the field. We started funding evaluators to work with programs—but we learned that was a really bad idea. Instead, we focused on helping programs learn to do evaluation. It was participatory. The programs could decide what to evaluate. They learned to collect and analyze data for themselves. Then when they needed outside evaluators, they could tell them what they wanted. Our latest work has been an 18-month institute where program staff learned about socio-emotional learning and then selected the characteristics they want to measure.

**ASM:** Who has been the biggest influence on you in accomplishing all this important work?

**Lena:** Oh, the practitioners. I've learned so much from them. Early on, I learned from the programs I observed for *Portraits of Youth Programs*, a project RBF funded in 1989 to highlight the great work programs were doing in literacy and youth development. I watched the staff of one program spend hours every day planning before the kids came in, grappling with how to teach writing in a way that was authentic and developmental. I think that's where I began to understand how literacy could be a part of programming. I understood intuitively that it *should* be, but then I was able to think about it in terms of how to actually plan a program and how reading and writing could be part of it.

Or then there were the sites we worked with in Reimagining the Afterschool Program. Dianne came up with the idea of working intensively for three years with a few programs to help them think about how to re-envision their programming and how to integrate literacy. Now, I'm still at ILS, right, this is 1997 or so, but I'm doing this work with Bowne where I basically lived with these two programs for three years.

The two programs could not have been more different. One was a fairly traditional afterschool program run by an immigrant services agency. It had every need you could imagine: Their building was falling down, their programming wasn't focused, their staff was incredibly young, and they had financial issues. And in all of this, their staff was doing some great work with literacy. They opened my eyes to some of the real challenges afterschool programs face.

The other organization was in a much better place financially and had a strong focus on community service and leadership. Where they needed help was integrating literacy. I mean, literacy was practically built into their advocacy work. But they needed support to help kids get better at reading and writing, by integrating reading and writing into the authentic work they were doing, even as they were working for change in their neighborhoods.

I spent a lot of time with these programs—and many others over the years—just watching the kids, talking with the director and the staff, learning about programming from the ground up. That, plus the Professional Development Group, is how I learned to foster literacy development in afterschool.

**ASM:** What will you do after the foundation officially closes its doors in December?

**Lena:** Well, I'm going to spend more time taking care of Lena! [Laughs] But I'm also thinking about getting back to teaching or tutoring reading. That's my first love, and I haven't been able to do much of it for a long time.