

Plourde helps make reading a REALity

By NIKKI CHASE

Books are more than the words inside them.

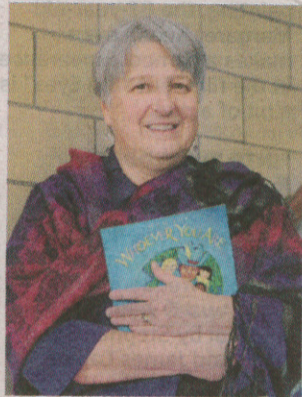
"They take care of you," said Jan Plourde, director/founder of the REAL program, which stands for reading, educational assistance and learning. "The experience of books is so important."

Designed to encourage early childhood literacy, the REAL program meets before and after school, 27 weeks out of the year. Started in 2013, more than 100 kids participate in the program, which meets at the Lynn Boys and Girls Club and Brickett Elementary School.

"People constantly ask me, 'Why Lynn?'" said Plourde, a Beverly resident. "When I had my business, the Learning Tree Stores (in Danvers and Stoneham), I met hundreds of people who were teaching, a large number of them in Lynn. They were coming into the store and spending money out of their pockets for these kids — yet they were still so optimistic."

In addition to helping kids improve literacy, the program has the REAL Mobile, a donated van stocked with books, which the kids can choose from and keep.

"These kids don't have access to books or an environment to take care of books," she said. "Not just reading



STAFF PHOTO BY PATRICK WHITTEMORE

DRIVING FORCE: Jan Plourde runs REAL, which has a van full of books to give to kids.

them, but putting them on a bookshelf and taking care of them."

Plourde is one of five recipients of the Mass Literacy Champion grant, which recognizes literacy leaders and educators in communities throughout the state. The \$1,000-grant from the non-profit paid for signage for the REAL Mobile, as well as a banner, which she hopes will "keep literacy visible."

"My fear is that we do not put enough emphasis on having a literate society," she said. "As an early childhood educator, if we can provide the care and quality of education in the lower grades, it can give them the jump-start they need."