



FVRC Spring Newsletter

Embracing readers, teachers and the community

FVRC 24-25 Officers

President-Camille Lutz, Secretary- Katina Kastrantas, Treasurer- Diana Wilkie, Membership- Kristen Walsh, Social Media- Ashley Falkos, Past President- Dawn Lutz; Illinois Reads-Katina Kastrantas



Letter from the President

Spring break season is upon us! Whether your plans include travel, staycations, or simply catching up on projects that tend to get neglected during the school year, it's all glorious! Not to mention our unpredictable Illinois spring weather... Will I need a coat? Will I need short sleeves? Should I bring an umbrella? Can I break out my flip-flops yet? And my new favorite: how windy will it get today? Whether you've just wrapped up your break or are just beginning, there's a sense of renewal and regeneration in the air.

Speaking of renewal and regeneration, how many of you had the opportunity to attend the IRC convention just a few weeks ago? While I wasn't able to attend, I heard from several people that it was outstanding! Kudos to Cindi Koudelka, the IRC team, and all the volunteers who made it

happen. To top it off, we have our very own FVRC Service Award. We couldn't be prouder of her!



Although this is our final newsletter of the school year, it may just be our most jam-packed! FVRC and SRL co-hosted a winter event and had a wonderful time with author Adi Alsaid in February. We've included a write-up from an OHS senior who attended the event—it's always great to experience things like this through the lens of a student. Alongside our amazing book reviews from Kristen Walsh and a member spotlight on Heidi Podjasek, you'll also see that FVRC has *one* last event for you to attend: our annual **Wine, Dine, and Collaborate**. This is a fan favorite! Join us on Friday, May 16th, for wine, light snacks, and the time and space to wind down with fellow educators from the community.



Before I wrap this up and let you get to the good stuff, I want to take a moment to say thank you. Thank you to our members for staying true to the love of not only reading and writing, but also the importance of continuous learning. Whether it's through our newsletters, events, book talks, or the many opportunities IRC offers, I'm thankful that *you* are teaching our children. I'd be remiss if I didn't give a sincere round of applause and gratitude to our FVRC board members. The ladies who make up this small but mighty group are some of the most dedicated, passionate, and patient people I know.

Inspire Growth,
Camille Lutz
FVRC President

Welcome New Members!

Jessica Erickson
Lisa Jacobson
Lindsey Sanderson
Ingrid Fitzpatrick
Karin Lewis
Corinne Bluhm
Zelma Frohlich
Traci Hamilton
Kayla Jones
Zara Martinez
Colleen Bell



FVRC Spring Event



Hosted by the
Fox Valley Reading Council

WINE , DINE, & COLLAB

Join us for wine, snacks, and conversation to celebrate
another great year of literacy in our community!

5:30-7:00 PM

MAY 16, 2025

Up North Wine Tasting Room
9 N 2nd St, Geneva, IL 60134
<https://www.upnorthwinegeneva.com/>

Winter Event Co-Hosted with SRL

Workshop with Adi Alsaid

Fox Valley Reading Council had a blast co-hosting Adi Alsaid alongside the Secondary Reading League for our winter event! Adi guided us through the writing process, emphasizing the power of observation in sparking creativity. We learned how paying attention to the world around us can fuel our writing. A huge thank you to Adi for spending the morning with us—it was an inspiring and memorable experience!



Inspiring young writers: Literacy event with author Adi Alsaid

Numerous local hidden gem opportunities exist for aspiring young authors to explore, such as the workshop with [author Adi Alsaid](#). This impactful event was hosted at the Kane Co. Regional Office of Education on Feb. 8.

"Having someone [at author events] in real flesh and blood creates a greater sense of connection to students, especially if they can interact with them," said OH English teacher Elizabeth Prigodich. During the event, Alsaid provided insight into his background and publishing career, explaining how his life events shaped him into who he is today and helped him achieve his dream career. He even did book signings at the end, as each attendee received one of his published pieces.

"I'm trying to tell stories that carry a message with it," said Alsaid. "The main message of my stories is about how it's okay to be lost and not know how you fit into the world around you, because eventually, you do find that," said Alsaid.

Alsaid has published ten books, ranging from young adult fiction to middle-grade fantasy stories, all of which have unique contexts of how they were drafted.

"Well, my favorite part of these events is understanding who authors are as people because we don't often get the backstory of why they wrote a book, or where their ideas originated from," said Kristen Walsh, executive board member of the [Fox Valley Reading Council](#).

The event went into detail about how the writing process can be tumultuous at times, but once you truly focus, it can be a true joy and gift to hold.

"I'm usually writing in a coffee shop with earphones in, or at home late at night when everyone's asleep and I have very little interaction," said Alsaid. "The best part about these events is interacting with people, many of whom have read what I've written."

Getting to know authors as people and not solely by their profession encourages and provides insight for young writers. Many authors describe themselves as having been confused or angsty teenagers like them at one point, making their ambitions or goals seem all the more real.

"Our goal is to promote literacy and the joy it holds, and we try to engage the members of our organization and the community," said Walsh. "So we enjoy having events where we can bring a variety of people and expose them to different parts of literature they haven't read."

Through these events, community members can learn and even write with an author, and share their work aloud if they'd like, allowing themselves to be heard and known.

"The more we can get this out to students, teachers, and parents then that excitement travels with us," said Camille Lutz, president of Fox Valley Reading Council. "I can't wait to return to my classroom on Monday and share the quotes I wrote from Adi."

2025 Illinois Reading Council Conference Recap

"Liberating Literacy: Embrace Love, Joy, & Empowerment"

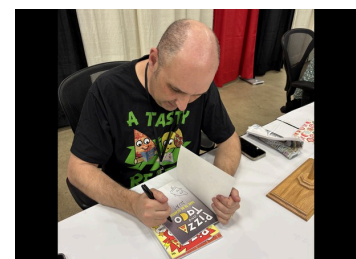
The 2025 Illinois Reading Council Conference, held on March 13-14 in Springfield, Illinois, was a powerful gathering that celebrated the transformative power of literacy. With the theme "Liberating Literacy: Embrace Love, Joy, & Empowerment," the event brought together educators, authors, and literacy advocates from across the state to share their passion for reading and the endless possibilities it holds for learners.



The conference featured an incredible lineup of keynote speakers, each of whom brought unique perspectives to the conversation on literacy. Beyond the keynote speakers, the conference offered a wide array of workshops and breakout sessions, covering everything from early literacy interventions to strategies for fostering lifelong readers. Educators exchanged ideas, gained new insights, and left with practical strategies that would immediately benefit their students.

The exhibitors at the conference were also a highlight, offering attendees access to a wide range of educational tools, books, resources, and even trendy items from The Teacher Truck! The exhibit hall buzzed with excitement as educators eagerly explored new materials and discovered resources that would enrich their teaching and support their students' growth.

The 2025 Illinois Reading Council Conference was a celebration of everything that makes literacy an essential part of education—joy, empowerment, and connection. With thought-provoking sessions, inspiring speakers, and a community of passionate educators, the event reinforced the idea that literacy is not just about reading and writing but about cultivating a lifelong love of learning and the importance of diversity. The conference was a testament to the power of books and the educators who dedicate themselves to unlocking their magic for students of all ages. We can't wait to see how the impact of this event will continue to ripple through classrooms across Illinois and beyond!



IRC 2024-2025 Grant Recipients

Congrats are on order for two of our members that received grants from IRC! Woohoo!

Fox Valley- Dawn Wolber \$1,180 Book of the Month/"Libro del Mes"

Fox Valley- Diana Wolf \$700 Building Empathy Through Book Clubs

Membership Spotlight

Meet Heidi Podjasek

What is your name, position and district(optional) you work in?

Heidi Podjasek, Library Media Specialist at Boulder Hill Elementary
in Oswego School District #308



Briefly describe yourself, including personal information.

I have been an educator for 26 years, and have been fortunate for 20 of those years to be in the district where I have lived my entire life. I have held many positions in education during this time, including Middle School ELA teacher and Assistant Principal, Elementary Principal and Central Office Administrator. At the start of the 2023-2024 school year, I returned to teaching as an elementary Library Media Specialist, and am having the greatest time!

What are you reading personally or professionally?

Reading is one of my favorite things to do. It has always been a joyful part of my life. I love to read mysteries and thrillers, nonfiction about the lives of people, and of course, children's literature. Professionally I am reading *The Gift of Story* by John Schu and *The Joy of Reading* by Donalyn Miller and Teri Lesene.

What are some of your students' favorite books?

They love graphic novels! This is by far the most popular section in our library, and the books I just can't keep on the shelves.

What strategy or instructional tip do you love and why?

My focus in library instruction this year is on engaging students in activities that help them find joy in reading and books. One classroom strategy I love but often let go of when time is tight is classroom circles. I plan to reincorporate these with a book-themed topic/conversation each week to open the library class.

Why is reading a passion for you?

I have been an avid
escape, and my m



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y, my teacher, my
have loved

bringing books to children and seeing their excitement when they discover a book, an author, a character, or a story that they love.

Letter of Gratitude

Dear Fox Valley Reading Council,

Thank you so much for your support of Judson University's Belize Mission trip. It was truly "unbelievable." The power of literacy is amazing in any culture. Students in the little village of San Antonio Rio Hondo, Belize enjoyed read alouds, literacy, science and art activities. The culminating activity was reading John Schu's "This is a School" and the entire school signing each student's tee shirt. Your gift helped supply the shirts for each student and books for the teachers.

Grateful,

Kristen Stombres

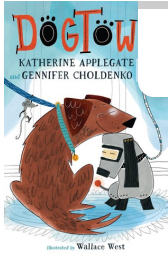
Judson University



Judson has completed this trip for 10 years with Kristen going for 8 of those years. She takes a strong team, four of them were IRC student members this time.

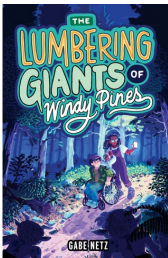


Book Reviews by Kristen Walsh



year. And opportunities to discuss point-of-view. My students were able to connect with the feeling of rejection by family members. As we read together, there were many moments of reflection and also laughter. For dog lovers yes, but the characters come to life for all.

It is narrated by Chance, just one of the dogs looking to be adopted. The shelter does not just give a home to flesh and blood dogs but robot dogs as well and we discover the challenges of shelter life. These two groups share a great dislike for each other but learn to not only tolerate each other but find friendship in unlikely places. There is also another surprise friend who teaches that friendship comes in all shapes and sizes. We don't all need to be the same but can find good in what is different. Chance gains a new understanding of Metal Head as he bonds with a reading buddy and learns he is not so heartless after all. "Your heart is a muscle. It grows stronger the more you use it." Good reflections on that statement!

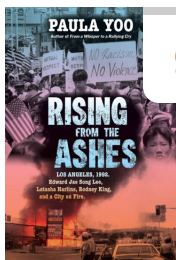


Lumbering Giants of Windy Pines by Mo Netz

A Jewish girl who uses a wheelchair faces demons when she and her mom move to a former mining town for work. Because Jerusha (Jerry) has moved around from one place to another and because of her disability, she finds it difficult to make friends. She prefers to spend time with Paul, her imaginary dragon, who adds much humor to the story. What a great voice of conscience.

Mama is secretive about her new job, loggers have been disappearing and Jerry is forbidden to enter the woods. When her mother goes missing, Jerry takes a new friend to find and rescue her from a land full of demons. Scary and creepy!

Mo Netz gives us a refreshingly authentic depiction of physical disability while the main character uses her wheelchair in strong and creative ways to solve problems. The author writes from his own personal experience and makes life in a wheelchair just an everyday event, not over the top explanations. A heart-warming tale of friendship, family, monsters and magic.



event that erupted in our country 30 years ago. Tensions were high in Los Angeles County in April, 1992, after members in the Black and Koreatown communities failed to receive justice for those who had been wrongfully attacked. Riots broke out and gained momentum with a lack of police presence. Economic hardship and poverty spurred it on.

Prosecutor Terri White in the Rodney King case is just one of the many heroes I recognized in this story. People from varying cultures helping each other in life and death situations. Both wanted justice. Good and bad can be found in all human relationships.

Systemic challenges continue today. American history of redlining, food deserts, unequal penalties for crimes in different communities, lopsided juries are just some of what leads to racial tensions today. Author Yoo used loads of interviews, direct quotes, news reports and photographs to tell the story. She movingly threaded the stories together to help me understand what was happening in our country all at the same time. Gave great historical context.

Fox Valley Reading Council's Literacy Project Partnership with Love Smiles

4th Annual Love's Mile Kid Run & Fox Trot 5K

Help us run pediatric cancer out of town!

Join Love Smiles for a fun-filled event that's all about family. Whether you are a future Olympian or just coming out to stretch your legs in support, everyone is welcome to gather and enjoy the event: fun, food, and more for all of our participants.

<https://runsignup.com/Race/IL/BedfordPark/LoveSmilesFoxTrot5K>

1. Give your voice - use your voice to tell others about their work.
2. Give your time or talent — Volunteer for service! Use your skills to help. [Join our volunteer list.](#)
3. Bring new book donations to the next FVRC event.
4. Give A Fox — [Send a comfort fox](#) to a child battling cancer.
5. Create the positive impact you want to see in the world simply by giving.

Be part of our mission to support Love Smiles as they provide love, comfort, peace, and support to those affected by pediatric cancer.

IRC Webinars

April 2, 2025 ~ St. Clair Detrick-Jules Empowerment Through Storytelling

St. Clair Detrick-Jules will share her journey to becoming an author, photojournalist, and public speaker. She'll touch on her writing process, finding subjects to include in her work, and creating spaces for people to share their stories. Themes will include representation of marginalized groups in media, cultivating community empowerment, and narrative storytelling as a vehicle of selfempowerment and social change.



Webinar Wednesdays

All webinars will begin at 7:00 pm. Members who watch the live or recorded webinars can earn one professional development clock hours for each webinar. Mark your calendars and register to take part in this convenient, free IRC membership benefit.

- **Members** will receive monthly emails with links to register for each webinar. Otherwise, members can also register through their online account or watch past webinars today.
- **Nonmembers** can also join online and sign up for the webinars through their new online account or watch past webinars today.





Fox Valley Reading Council

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Smore empowers educators to connect with their community, streamline school communications, and increase engagement.

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