

New Hanover County Schools

December 1, 2021

This following article focuses on the RAL mentoring partnership between New Hanover High School and Annie H. Snipes Academy of Arts & Design. It was written in the *Read Lead Succeed* literacy newsletter by Christina Beam in the Communications and Outreach Division of New Hanover County Schools, NC.

The basketball team comes in a little sleepy at 7:30 on Wednesday mornings. Some are in pajama pants, some in gym shorts, some in Crocs and slides and other footwear that makes the transition from bed to life a little easier.

They lope into the library at Snipes Academy of Arts with bleary eyes, but when they see their “little buddies” waiting for them, it all changes.

“Mother snakes don’t usually stay with their eggs,” a 6’4” player reads to a second grade boy who’s leaning in, temple almost touching his reading partner’s shoulder, little fingers helping to turn the pages. “She lays them in a soft, warm place and then she leaves them. Soon the baby snake pokes its head out and slithers away.”

Now in its fifth year, the Readers Are Leaders program partners New Hanover High School athletes with struggling readers to give the younger buddy a reading role model, and the older buddy the chance to serve as a mentor.

Lenton Donnell, counselor at Snipes and assistant coach of the Hanover basketball team, said the rewards are clear.

“They see older kids that look like them doing positive things and that motivates them to do the same,” he said. “And when it’s ‘read to self’ time in class, it’s like, ‘Oh man, my buddy was telling me to do this, or read this way, or if I struggle, to sound this word out.’”

For the older kids, titans of their high school, they get to step into a leadership role and practice tenderness and patience to kids who think the world of them, Donnell said.

Often later at basketball practice they'll be swapping stories of their time with their buddies, and once the season starts the little buddies will take a field trip to see the Wildcats play.

"I don't usually get up early, but I try to be on time for this," said senior guard Jeremy Aldrich, waiting with a stack of books on superheroes and robots and baseball a full hour before his classes at Hanover would start. "Not all of them have a role model, but they do remember us. They look up to us," he said. "So it's me making a change; how much I affect them, is how much it will affect me."

This is the fifth year that Snipes and Hanover have participated in the non-profit program, which was founded by retired educator and coach Wendell Byrd and serves schools in Virginia and North Carolina. Readers Are Leaders provides the books and also supports the high school team that's volunteering.

"Our struggling readers see themselves as special because a high school student-athlete cares enough about them to help them improve," Byrd said. "These students will often develop a more positive and rewarding attitude about reading, more confidence in themselves, and a stronger sense of belonging in a community that cares."

At Snipes, after focused reading time together, the buddies head to the gym to play basketball.

Second grader Jayden speculates that his buddy Lenier Pocknett doesn't mind waking up early to come see him every week.

"I like his hair, his personality, his actions," he said. "He comes to see me so he can read with me and have fun."
