

DREXEL UNIVERSITY

# College of Medicine

ALUMNI MAGAZINE

2019 REUNION  
PHOTO ALBUM | 28



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TELEMEDICINE



# A SHOT THAT CAN'T MISS!

What do hard fouls and buzzer beaters have to do with childhood literacy and high school graduation? For Drs. Hans Kersten and Dan Taylor, pediatricians at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, there's a direct connection. The physicians are part of Reach Out and Read, a national nonprofit that champions reading daily to youngsters and provides the books to do it. In a fortuitous moment, Drs. Kersten and Taylor united their passion for basketball with their care for children, creating a nationally recognized fundraiser that benefits thousands of local families.

Reach Out and Read's mission is to give every child, ages birth through 5 years, a book at every well visit. Since St. Chris began its program in 2001, more than 800,000 books, and literacy guidance, have been provided to more than 300,000 families. Kersten says that gifting a book — in conjunction with speaking with parents about literacy — is a powerful tool. "It's hard to break that cycle of poverty," he says. "But when you get kids interested in reading and see them really take off, it's exciting. You hand them a book and their eyes light up."

## BASED ON SCIENCE

Kersten and Taylor explain that the science behind Reach Out and Read is well established. The biggest predictor of high school graduation is one's reading level at the end of third grade. The biggest predictor of one's reading level at third grade is one's vocabulary at 3 years of age. The biggest predictor of vocabulary at 3 years of age is being read to (and spoken to) from birth.

As Taylor states, "When I've given a book to a 4-day-old, talking with the mom about the importance of reading — attachment, holding the baby and reading — I'm thinking about the 18-year-old graduating from high school and going off to college. Every time you give a book, you give that message."

The parents are the ones doing the work, both physicians stress. It's their engagement that matters. To this end, Taylor says when a baby is read to every day, "They're more likely to be prepared for school. Their brains grow



and they're stronger." Yet if there was no book to give, the conversation about brain development "wouldn't be as powerful. They wouldn't have that tool to remind them of the message we talked about, and how school success means a healthier life for the rest of their life."

Despite this powerful evidence, funding was a constant issue for the program's first 12 years. Resources that were once available waned, and the onus was on the office to fund the books. "Once you start giving out books at every well visit, the thought of not being able to feels like you're doing a complete disservice to the families," Taylor says. "I wouldn't be a whole pediatrician without being able to give out the books."

## PASSION MEETS PURPOSE

In the past, the St. Chris team tried various benefits and fundraisers. Kersten says a good night at a restaurant could raise \$4,000. They were being creative, but few of their endeavors had lasting traction. As Kersten notes, they don't teach fundraising in medical school.

Then one Sunday morning, at their regular pick-up



*Tournament Planning Committee (l-r): Hans Kersten, Dan Taylor, David Mercuris (front), Mark Tucker and Thomas Hammonds*

# REACH OUT AND READ

By Catherine McCorkle

## AT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN



basketball game, Kersten mentioned Reach Out and Read to another player, a real estate developer who'd grown up in North Philadelphia. The developer said he'd like to help. Kersten says this conversation quickly became "Let's have a basketball tournament." And they did.

That first tournament, in 2014, fielded eight teams and raised \$8,000, double Kersten's biggest fundraising effort to date. Based on its success, players in the Sunday morning league formed a planning committee to keep it going. The annual event, generously hosted by Germantown Friends School, continues to grow. In 2019, the sixth edition boasted 14 teams, 140 players, 40 volunteers and more than 20 sponsors. The tournament has raised close to \$110,000 so far.

"The beauty of it is, the guys are from disparate backgrounds," Taylor says. "You have doctors, guys who are unemployed, lawyers, school bus drivers, people who work at Germantown Friends in the maintenance department, all playing together for love of the game, and also understanding the city's children deserve a shot just like any kids in terms of success."

### BIGGER DREAMS

This past fall, the St. Christopher's program was chosen, out of 6,000 sites across the country, to receive the Richard Robinson Award, "in recognition of its outstanding

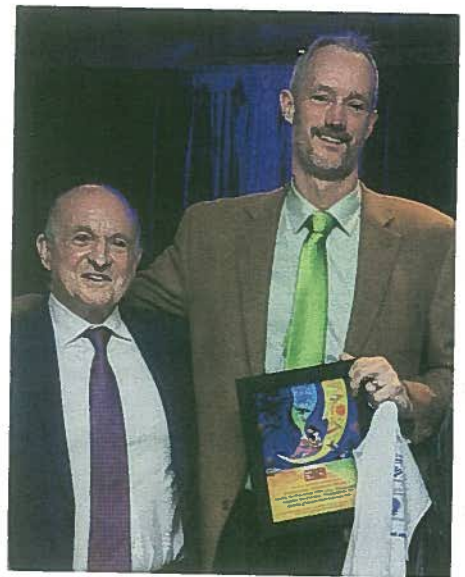
commitment to, and implementation and support of the Reach Out and Read model." More important than the award, however, is that the success of the basketball tournament has allowed Kersten and Taylor to dream for the children and families they serve.

Now, the books don't stop when a child reaches 5. School-age children receive books as well. The program was expanded to serve patients in other departments at St. Chris: Immunology, Special Needs, HIV, and satellite clinics.

There are books in over a dozen languages and stories that reflect a variety of experiences. "We have books for kids who are going through different struggles — a set of books for kids with incarcerated parents, books for kids with same-sex parents, books for kids that are struggling with gender identity. We have books with characters of all different ethnicities. We have situational books as well — books for grief," says Taylor.

Another goal of Kersten's is to develop a reading program for volunteers. "I'd love to do something with Drexel and get students up here on a volunteer basis," he says.

Reflecting on the success of the Reach Out and Read program at St. Chris, Taylor says their office has provided almost a library for some families. "It's a message that we believe in your child. You take home a tangible thing saying, 'We believe your child can succeed.'"



*Richard Robinson, chief executive of Scholastic, was on hand when Dr. Kersten accepted the national Richard Robinson Award from Reach Out and Read.*