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I grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My adolescence and teenage years, during the 1970s and 1980s, were filled with family. Aunts, uncles, and cousins—we all lived on the same city block—four houses worth. We were the expanding family tree of Italian immigrants who arrived on the steamship *Bolivia* from Reggio Calabria, Italy, in 1901.

So, while family was always around, it was my Aunt Connie who would drive me to library while my mother was at work. I remember my aunt checking out books in Italian, with large print, for a cousin, Josephine...who everyone called Bepa... who was in her 80s. She was tough, farm-raised, a great cook...and a reader, but she didn't move around well. She would walk to church and ride in the car to visit family, but moving around a library would have been difficult. So, whether it was providing access to books for me as a child or for an

elder family member, from an early age, I was shown that sharing access to books was an act of love.

As I grew older, I developed the habit of walking long distances, even taking the subway, to multiple libraries in Philadelphia. Readers know that habit grew from the encouragement to read I found through my family.

At school, I clearly recall being in our library as a 7th-grade student in 1980. Our classrooms did not have books for us to read for pleasure, just racks of cards with very short stories in them, so going to the school library was a real treat.

One occasion I specifically recall, Sister recommended a book, *About the B'nai Bagels*, by E.L. Konigsburg, to a friend, Paul. From what I could tell from the cover, it was a baseball book. I loved sports. And I waited for Sister to recommend a book to me. She never did. I still think about it, and I remember the title and book cover vividly, 40 years later.

Why has this one fragment of a moment stayed with me out of the millions of moments of my life as a student? I think about this a lot.

Knowing our readers is critical, yes, but alongside of that knowledge is the immeasurable importance of encouragement—for everyone. The longer I teach, the deeper my understanding of why and how encouragement allows human beings (of any age) to thrive.

To this point, the gift of the Book Love Foundation Grant in 2015 continues to serve any students who pass through my classroom not only because of the books themselves but also because a classroom library fosters connections among students and their teachers. I know my students better because we have books to share. I talk with my students more because we have books to share. I encourage my students more because we have books to share.

Ultimately, the Book Love Foundation is more than a couple of boxes of books. The Book Love Foundation is a lifeline leading to the millions of moments of encouragement that every student and teacher needs in a lifetime.

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