

Alvin Irby on Inspiring Kids to Identify as Readers

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Hello, and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast, a podcast from Boston Children's Museum about families and children created for the grown-ups in their lives.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Today, more than 82% of Black male fourth grade students in the United States are not proficient in reading. Getting kids to read regularly is essential to their success in adulthood. So how can we inspire and motivate children, especially vulnerable children to want to read?

As a former kindergarten teacher and the founder of Barbershop Books, today's guest Alvin Irby has dedicated his career to inspiring Black boys and other vulnerable children to identify as readers.

Barbershop Books works by placing children's book stands in barbershops to get young Black boys reading, as well as having the adult male, often a Black barber, encouraging them. They connect fun books to a male-centered space, and involve men in boys' early reading experiences.

In today's episode, Alvin and our host Boston Children's Museum CEO and President Carole Charnow talk candidly about the early literacy challenge facing our children, and how we can use humor, community, and a better understanding of our children's interests to get them proudly proclaiming themselves as readers.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Hello and welcome to the Big and Little podcast. I've had with me today Alvin Irby who is a former kindergarten teacher, turned award-winning social entrepreneur, international speaker, comedian, and author.

As founder of Barbershop Books, he was awarded the National Book Foundation's Innovations in Reading Prize. His keynotes and professional development workshops help school districts, library systems, and educational organizations create relevant and engaging learning experiences for all students.

He is an MS in childhood education from Bank Street Graduate School of Education and an MPA in public and nonprofit management from NYU. And he is many, many other things, including a great comedian and author, and so forth. So Alvin it's such a pleasure to have you here today.

ALVIN IRBY: Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to speak with you today.

CAROLE: And we just cannot wait to hear about your amazing work. So you have an extraordinary background and narrative about how you came to do what you're doing. And I wonder if you wouldn't mind starting by telling us a little bit about yourself.

ALVIN: Sure. So I am originally from Little Rock, Arkansas, born and raised. I made my way to New York City to become a teacher. I studied education and eventually had an opportunity to teach first grade. And there was a barber shop right across the street from my school in the Bronx.

And one day after school, I was just getting a haircut, and one of my first grade students came into the barber shop and just kind of plopped down on the sofa. And was just kind of getting antsy. And his mom, I remember, she was like, sit down.

And so the whole time I was watching this unfold, all I kept thinking was he should really be practicing his reading, because I was his first grade teacher, he was my student. And I wished I had a children's book to give him. But I didn't. And so it was really this kind of chance encounter with one of my first grade students that inspired the idea that is now Barbershop Books.

CAROLE: It's amazing how you got that idea. So can you tell us a little bit about Barbershop Books now, and how you've grown it and what its mission is, and what activities you're doing today?

ALVIN: Yeah. Barber Shop Book's mission is to inspire black boys and other vulnerable children to read for fun through culturally responsive and community-based programs. And that's essentially what we do. The work specifically in barbershops, our work in barbershops really focuses on connecting reading to a male-centered space, and involving Black men and boys' early reading experiences.

So there are lots of spaces and places where children might wait. But what's, I think, really unique about barbershops, especially in Black communities, is the way in which they often serve as almost a cultural center for Black men and boys.

CAROLE: So what's fascinating about this is that the barbers are engaged in the program. It's not that the books are just sitting there on the sofa. The barbers are actually involved. Can you tell us a little bit about what they do and how you help them to learn about what to do?

ALVIN: So many years ago when we were just getting started and we were putting bookshelves in barbershops, I would visit some of the barbershops and talk to the barbers about the program. And I learned that many of the barbers didn't touch the books because they said, well, those are for the kids. And I said, Oh, we need some kind of training to help barbers kind of understand how they can best support reading in their barbershops. And so we've developed an on-demand 15-minute early literacy barber training that we share with any of our new barbershop partners for them to better understand not only the program, but how they as barbers can really play a role in inspiring boys and other children to read for fun.

Lots of people want little Black boys to read-- principals, teachers, a host of other community members. But not everybody knows how to communicate early literacy concepts to a room full of Black men who may be focused on just cutting hair, right? And kind of making money.

And so I think one of the things that our early literacy barber training does is really uses stories and kind of examples that are relevant to our very specific audience, which in this case are the barbers.

CAROLE: You have made the study of literacy your life's work. And you've come up with a fascinating concept with this idea of children identifying themselves as readers. Can you talk about what that-- it's a powerful but nuanced concept. And I wonder if you could describe it for our listeners?

ALVIN: Sure. So oftentimes, when talking about the importance of reading, the conversations that are being had revolve around helping children develop a love of reading, or that type of way of speaking about it.

And one of the things-- the things that I think kind of distinguishes Barbershop Books and our approach and our philosophy to our work is that we really are focused on cultivating the reading identity of children. And I often tell people that children, just like adults, can fall in and out of love with something, depending on many external factors.

But if a child or an adult identifies in a certain way, it's often something that is a lifelong part of who they are. And so when we think about a lot of the challenges that many struggling readers face in terms of it's in the case of Black boys limited access to books that they identify with or that they enjoy limited access to Black male reading role models.

And just some of the other kind of skill-related challenges that might come from having a number of situations like maybe teachers who aren't as experienced or just not access to books at home, I think a lot of these things kind of require children to be more intrinsically motivated.

And I think that there's a lot of programs designed to really address skill deficiencies or areas where a child-- their vocabulary or their comprehension or their fluency or their phonics or their phonemic awareness.

But there's not a whole lot of programs that are explicitly focused on cultivating children's intrinsic motivation. Things that when they leave school are going to make them want to engage with print, engage in reading experience. And I think that's what we're trying to do with Barbershop Books, is really zero in on that identity piece in helping kids to say three words. I'm a reader.

CAROLE: I love that because one of the things you talk about is having children being in control of their own learning, and having this identity as I am a reader gives you that power, that agency. Is that what you would say?

ALVIN: Absolutely. Absolutely. When I read an article several years ago called Stemming the Tide, it focused on women and STEM. And what this article did is it looked at women's implicit attitudes towards STEM.

And so a researcher asked them, do you think women can do STEM? And all the women were like, of course, they can do STEM. But when they looked at their implicit attitudes, many of these women did not associate women with STEM. They didn't think that they were good at STEM.

And so what the researchers did is they gave these women an opportunity to interact with other women who were successful in STEM careers. And then they reassessed their kind of implicit attitudes toward STEM. And the researchers found that these repeat interactions with women in STEM fields countered negative self stereotypes that many of the women had.

And it replaced negative associations between women and STEM with positive ones. And I kid you not, when I read this article, I said, Oh snap, Oh snap. This is what's going on with Black boys. I think many of them do not associate reading and books with their identity as a Black male or as a Black boy.

And I was like if we can create more opportunities to connect Black boys with Black male reading role models, if we can connect reading to Black male-centered spaces, we can help counter negative self-stereotype. We can help create positive associations.

And I just want to be clear. Even if negative associations exist, even if a child may not feel very confident in their own reading ability, oftentimes those are not the problems, but have symptoms of other issues that are happening that they have no control over, like a child has no control over the books in their home in terms of whether they can buy them.

If they're a young child, they often may not be able to walk to the library themselves. And so even I just want to make sure that I don't-- that no one comes away from this thinking that Barbershop Books adheres to kind of deficit thinking.

I really do believe that our work really kind of takes an asset or kind of strengths-based approach to say to barbers, guess what? We have a curated list of books that boys have told us that they really like. If you just put them out, not saying every single kid who comes into your shop is going to interact with them. But there are a number of children who, if books were made available, they would choose to read.

CAROLE: And one book in particular is a book that you wrote called Gross Greg which is a very funny and full of humor book. You talk about children's reading preferences and the books that are available to young Black students. Talk to me please about this reading preference issue, and also a little bit about the great book that you wrote to be part of the library in your barber shops?

ALVIN: So Gross Greg right now is not one of the titles that we distribute to barbershops, but Gross Greg, the children's book that I wrote is available in our e-library, which was a free kind of online resource that we launched during the pandemic.

In terms of reading-- the reading preferences of children, I really think it's critical. Some children say I don't like to read. And I would argue that they just haven't found the right book yet. But I think that there's a book out there for every child. And hopefully, children will have enough reading opportunities to come across or encounter titles that they like.

But related to the book that I wrote, Gross Greg, why I wrote it, and I think its implications for children literature in general, I was a first grade teacher. I was a kindergarten teacher. And also for the past 12 years or so, I've been a stand up comedian.

And so I became very frustrated when I would see book lists for Black boys, or I would just see general book lists for young children. And they didn't include humor titles. Anyone who has spent a significant amount of time with children knows that they're silly, that they are always laughing.

And yet when it comes to diverse books and books that feature Black protagonists, Black characters, far too often, I've found that the topics tend to lean toward serious topics. They really-- slavery, civil rights, or some of the titles will only stop at how Black children are different, such as focusing on certain physical characteristics like their skin color or their hair texture, which again, are important.

I think books that affirm children and who they are and how they look are important. But those shouldn't be the only titles that Black children and other children have access to. I certainly think that no child's introduction to a Black character in the children's book should be them as a slave or in some kind of oppressed situation.

I think that it's just important that we continue the diversity efforts. And there's been a lot of progress in terms of the ways in which I think Black children are represented in children's literature. But I certainly think that there's always space and opportunity for more narratives that kind of go beyond the ones that are most prevalent today.

CAROLE: That's fascinating. I was very interested when we spoke earlier about this idea of a reading spot. So the places where kids like to read, where they can be a reader. So can you talk a little bit about places to read, where kids find a comfortable spot to read?

ALVIN: Absolutely. At the beginning of the pandemic when barber shops closed, along with many other businesses, Barbershop Books got to work developing a virtual program called Reading So Lit Summer. And it was during the development of Reading So Lit Summer that we decided we wanted to create a program-- a literacy program that would help children explore their reading preferences.

And during the summer, we explored three. And from that original content, we expanded the idea to create a program called Reading So Lit Classroom that explores seven different kind of reading preference data points.

And so the first one that children explore, whether it is for our Reading So Lit Summer or our Reading So Lit Classroom program is their favorite reading spot. And we don't start the program by asking about their favorite reading spot because for many children with very limited reading experiences, they may not know.

They literally haven't read in enough different places to even know. And so over the course of two to three lessons, children first explore what are different reading spots? What is a reading spot? We really emphasize equity.

And we do that by incorporating imaginative play and explaining to children that if you use your imagination, you can read anywhere. You can read on a cloud. You can read in a castle. You can read in a treehouse. And for some children, those types of open-ended explorations really unearth kind of things that they didn't even know about themselves.

And I always share the example of when I was teaching Reading So Lit Summer to a group of 26 to eight-year-olds on Zoom, if you can imagine that. And I remember asking them if a toilet could be a reading spot. And all of the boys in unison said no, no, no. You can't read on the toilet, the very idea just set the whole group into a frenzy.

And so then I said to the boys, OK, here's what I would like you to do. This is virtual, right? So I said, I would like you to find an older sibling or an adult in your house. And I just want you to ask them, have they ever, ever in their life read anything on the toilet? And if they say yes, I just want you to raise your hand. And I kid you not, a few seconds later, I saw all of these little hands slowly, very reluctantly coming up onto the screen.

And I think that much like the keynotes that I deliver, much like the workshops that I lead, so much of I think the work of reading, the work of learning is really about expanding children's realm of possibility. I think that that's one of the most powerful things about reading is that your reality as it is right now in terms of the limited experiences that we all have can always be expanded. And when you have new experiences, I believe that it really expands what we think is possible. Either for ourselves, for our life, for the world. And that's one of the-- I think the greatest gifts of reading.

CAROLE: That's magnificent. I wanted to ask you to tell our listeners this little anecdote you told me about the one little boy who had a special name for his bedroom.

ALVIN: Oh, yes. So we didn't have homework for our Reading So Lit program. We had Lit Work. And so the Lit Work, after the first lesson was for the boys to go and read in five different reading spots. Any five reading spots that they wanted, it could be in their imagination or they could be physical places around their house or apartment.

And when they shared out the next lesson, one of the boys shared that his favorite reading spot was his kingdom. And I remember I was like your kingdom. And all the other students were just like, his Kingdom. And we were like, what is your kingdom? He's like, Oh, it's my bedroom. But I call it my kingdom.

And for me all I kept thinking was how powerful is this for a child who might be living in a shelter or in a space where they might not feel confident about sharing details about their living situation? And so I think that the reading instruction, the reading experiences that we create for children, they shouldn't just start or stop at the reading skills that children need in order to become proficient readers.

But I think part of the important work that needs to happen, especially considering all of the challenges that have been presented by the pandemic, I think we really have to take a step back and really think about, what are additional, not in place of the kind of science of reading and other types of really important insights that we have.

But what in addition to those types of standards-based and data-driven approaches, what can we do that will help cultivate children's intrinsic motivation to ensure that the children who don't have books at home, who don't have anyone who reads to them at home, that they too are motivated to harass their parent, to buy them a book, or to harass their parents to take them to the library.

Because you know what? Children harass their parents for all kinds of things that are not books. And so I say to myself, why not create the type of reading experiences that inspire and motivate children to want to read for fun?

CAROLE: Absolutely. I wanted to drill down a little bit into this experience in the barbershop. So if you could just sort of take us through how this works. Obviously, someone walks in, they're coming to get a haircut. What happens with the child? And how does this unfold into a reading experience?

ALVIN: So one of the things that we share with barbers is that not every child that comes into their barbershop is going to want to read. And we want to make that clear to them. And we also explain that their role and the role of the space is not for children to be forced to read, but to create an opportunity for them to read.

And so when a child or parent comes in, we encourage barbers to always invite children and families to engage with the space. But we have designed the kind of reading space in our barbershops, so that children can independently engage with it.

So one of the things that you'll notice is that we don't use a standard bookshelf where you can only see the spine of a book. But we use a colorful kid-sized bookshelf that displays the book covers. So of course, we want every single barber to invite every single child and every single parent to engage with our reading space.

But even if a barber doesn't, even if a parent-- I mean, we definitely want parents to engage with their children in reading in the barbershop. But even if a parent doesn't, we have designed the space so that children can interact with the books independently.

And I think that for the work that we do at Barbershop Books, we really try and design experiences and programs around the reality of the space, and not necessarily around ideals. So ideally, we want every barber to invite every parent every towel.

Ideally, we want every parent with a young child to read. But we know that our world doesn't function in ideals. And that there are realities that I think can influence whether or not certain actions are taken. And so for us, we want to make sure that the child who comes in, whether or not a barber says something, whether or not a parent says something, they can walk over to a bookshelf that is sitting in their seating in the seating area, and they can grab a book and read it.

We also, during the pandemic, created a program poster that has prompts to help barbers and parents start conversations with children around reading. And it also has a QR code that a child or parent can scan with their phone that will directly take them to the barbershop book's e-library, which is a free collection of independently published children's books by Black and Brown authors. And we have over 70 read aloud videos.

CAROLE: Wow. That's just remarkable. And before we go, I definitely want to get all this information for our listeners. So this is just the most fascinating story. And I think you are meeting children where they are and providing them with this opportunity to engage.

So I don't have any doubt that you think that this has the potential to change lives. So can you tell us a little bit about your personal mission, and what your goal is ultimately for this tremendous program that you've started?

ALVIN: One of the main goals of the Barbershop Books program and the Barbershop books organization is to inspire children to read for fun and to enjoy learning. At a very high level, that is really what we want.

We want children to know that if there's something that they want to learn, there's something they want to know about, they don't have to wait on someone else, but that actually they can find it in a book or they can go and research it somewhere.

I think that's kind of one of the kind of high level goals that we have for our work. Also I think part of our work is for really advocating for child-centered reading experiences. There are lots of organizations and institutions and entities that kind of decide what books make it into libraries or what books make it into classrooms.

And I think that there's a tremendous opportunity for children to be involved in a much more substantive and in-depth way in terms of them actually influencing the types of books that they have access to.

And I think that by helping children explore their reading preferences, not just their favorite reading spots, but also their favorite fiction genre or non-fiction genre, and really exploring those things and developmentally-appropriate ways that will hopefully empower children to be able to advocate for themselves.

But also to equip adults with student information, student data that they can use to better personalize reading experiences. I think that is also, I think, a major goal of our work in barbershops, is to make sure that communities know what are the books that boys, that Black boys are saying that they actually enjoy reading.

I think that when you are surrounded by books or by people who read books to their children, sometimes you can make assumptions that a parent knows about *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, or that they even know that *Captain Underpants* or *No, David* are really popular books, but not every parent does. And I think that by centering the voices of Black boys and other children, we hopefully can create more positive reading experiences for children.

CAROLE: That's just a beautiful vision. So can you tell us how to help you? I mean, how can we find information about Barbershop books? Can we make donations? Can we have to buy the books on your ebook, your e-library?

ALVIN: So we absolutely welcome donations. If anyone would like to make a donation, they can visit our website at barbershopbooks.org. They can also recommend a book. If there is a book that a little boy in your life won't let go of or is forcing you to read over and over and over again, we would love to know what that book is. And would like to make sure that it's on our radar.

Also if you would like to recommend a barber shop. If you know a barber shop, maybe one where you take your son to get his haircut, you can recommend that barbershop to be included in the program. And if you would like to even go a step further to sponsor that barbershop for 475, you can sponsor any barbershop in any neighborhood in the United States.

And we will ship a curated list of books, year supply of books, along with a colorful bookshelf poster and other program materials directly to that barbershop. So there are lots and lots of ways for individuals, organizations, companies, and foundations to support Barbershop Books. And we want to connect with any and everybody who wants to help the babies read.

CAROLE: Wow. I think everyone who's hearing this is just as moved as I am, and is moved to help you as much as we can as to do this incredible work that you're doing. Alvin, I just cannot thank you enough for being with us today, but also for this tremendous vision you have and how you're carrying it out for the betterment of so many young children. Thank you so very much.

ALVIN: Well, thank you. And thank you for the work that you do over at the Children's Museum in Boston. I think that the fun and explorations that children's museums provide to children is a valuable part of child development.

And I don't have to tell you about the importance of play. I think that we all, all have a role to play in helping the little ones in our lives to get onto a path that's going to help them to lead a successful and a productive adult life.

CAROLE: Thank you so, so much and we look forward to continuing to work with you and help you with your tremendous work.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): That's it for the Big and Little Podcast. To learn more, donate, or get involved with Barbershop Books, visit barbershopbooks.org. Thanks for listening and stay tuned for more Big and Little coming soon. Thank you to PNC Bank for sponsoring the Big and Little Podcast.

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