

FEATURED

Christian County Literacy Council names new director

By Zirconia Alleyne New Era Editor

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Francene Gilmer, the new executive director of the Christian County Literacy Council, speaks to board members Monday during its meeting at the Hopkinsville-Christian County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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Nearly a year after losing the late Beverly Whitfield, the Christian County Literacy Council has hired a new executive director.

Hopkinsville native Francene Gilmer will lead the council's literacy initiatives in the community, such as developing new ways to reach children with books amid the COVID-19 pandemic and bringing on more community partners.

"Coming back home wasn't planned, but it happened," Gilmer said, noting that she moved back to take care of her mother. "... My mother actually saw on the front page of the newspaper about the legacy of Mrs. Beverly Whitfield, and Wayne (Goolsby) advertising the position. (My mother) mentioned it to me about three times, and I thought I'd better check it out, so I did and here I am."



Gilmer is a 1977 graduate of Western Kentucky University where she earned a degree in community health education. She then moved to Charleston, Illinois, where she attended Eastern Illinois University and got her master's degree in college student personnel services.

Throughout her 30-year career in higher education, Gilmer has worked at Illinois State University, University of Evansville, Kentucky State University, the University of Kentucky, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System and Vanderbilt University in Nashville where she was director of the career center.

“All of my jobs from Vanderbilt forward have been career related,” she said. “So working with education has been my life. ... Our children must continue to have access to education that embraces reading and literacy so their pursuits toward higher education are realized. We've got to get our children to be excited about reading and being fluent readers.”

Gilmer said her vision for the literacy council has evolved since the pandemic began. Now, she has ideas on par with those of members of the board to build a database of digital content that features community readers reading books for school-aged children. A committee was put together at Monday's meeting to explore this idea.



As board members talked about different ways of connecting with school children, Gilmer said, “In terms of connecting with kids in the city — you've really hit it. It's podcasts, it's Zoom and other digital platforms, it's letting teachers know that at 10 o'clock you can click on a link in the classroom and let the children hear and see a book being read on the screen.

“You don’t even have to see a person,” she continued. “You can see pages flipping, things flying through the sky, all kinds of fun things to make it appropriate for that particular audience.”

Gilmer said one of her goals is to grow the program, and she hopes to get more downtown businesses on board as sponsors and partners.

“When I see the word ‘literacy,’ I really think there is a lot of potential for our community, and I’m excited to be back and get involved and to see how we can grow the literacy council projects,” she said.

In other business

- The literacy council voted to approve two books for the upcoming Beverly Whitfield Community Reader Day. For students kindergarten through second grade, the book will be “I Am Human: A Book of Empathy” by Susan Verde. For students third to sixth grade, the book will be “What Do You Do With a Problem” by Kobi Yamada.
- Mrs. Pickle and Real Men Read are postponed indefinitely, and a virtual plan for Community Reader Day is being determined.
- A new Community Library is planned next to the bus stop by First Presbyterian.
- A fundraising committee was formed for the Salvation Army Christmas Angel Tree. “Santa Claus has got to come this year,” said literacy council board president Wayne Goolsby, “and if mama and daddy can’t afford it, that’s where we step in and raise some money. If we can do something to help, I think we should.”

