

Reading by age 2

Teacher, former Olympic hopeful, develops program that teaches toddlers to read

By **Stephen Elliott**
sellott@qconline.com

At 4, the little girl can draw stares from adults who overhear her reading out loud to her dad, Steve Van De Walle, of Silvis.

The child, Amaris Van De Walle, is an impressive reader, and she should be. She's already had two years of practice.

Mr. Van De Walle, a teacher at Buchanan Elementary School in Davenport, and his wife, Kari Oliva-Van De Walle, have also taught their second daughter, Kiera, 2, to read, and they fully expect their baby boy, due in September, to read at an early age.

Teaching babies how to read is something Mr. Van De Walle, a teacher and a former amateur boxing champion, wants to teach everyone.

"The genius is in the child already," Mr. Van De Walle says after school Thursday in his classroom. "We, as parents and educators, just need to bring it out."

Amaris was born nine weeks premature, weighing only 3 pounds. Pictures in a family photo album show Mr. Van De Walle holding his tiny daughter in his hands and sleeping on his chest at the hospital.

"Every book I've ever read about (premature babies), medical books, say when they're born, they typically will be cognitively delayed and behind a couple of years," he explained. "There may even be a chance of learning disabilities."

Mr. Van De Walle couldn't accept this. Defeat isn't something he easily bears.

Mr. Van De Walle father died while he was young, the loss touches him even today. At 18, in 1994, Mr. Van De Walle was involved in a near fatal accident that stopped any dreams of becoming an Olympic boxer or a future world champion. Even today, he can point to guys he fought in the amateurs who now fight on HBO and Showtime for big purses. He doesn't dwell on what could have been.

His children, his life, his job as a

teacher, make him thankful for what he has now.

From his own studies, he put together ways to make reading fun. Using a series of techniques, he had Amaris reading words and sentences at 2 years old. A home video shows her reading word cards and sentences placed in front of her shortly after she turned 3.

"They just love to learn," he said. "The one-on-one attention, they love it. I used a series of techniques to get her to master her reading. A lot of it is lap reading. "She would sit there and let me read to her. Reading to her at least 15 minutes a day.

"She understands what she reads. If she couldn't visualize an apple, it wouldn't make sense to teach her the word apple."

Mr. Van De Walle is in the process of producing a program and curriculum for teaching babies to read called Believe It Baby Literacy Program. He is currently contacting school districts to discuss implementing it in area school districts.

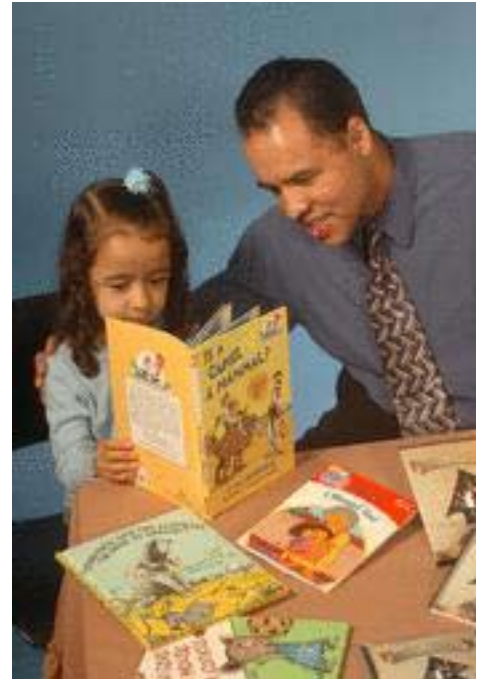
What he did simply to help his own children may now turn into something that helps others.

Believe It Baby™

Believe It Baby is a program third-grade teacher Steve Van De Walle has developed to teach babies how to read.

Some suggestions he has for parents include:

- Parents should read to their babies as soon as possible. It builds a bond between parent and child.
- Get familiar with word patterns and rhyming words.
- Develop letter recognition. That's what all parents can start with.
- Expose children to a wide range of visual images and pictures. Children have a thirst for knowledge.
- For More information: steve@believeitbaby.com 309-292-0072.



Steve VanDeWalle pays close attention as his 4-year-old daughter, Amaris, who reads books well beyond most 4-year-olds. Mr. VanDeWalle and his wife used a program he created with their daughter from the time she was born, assisting her to learn to read at a very young age. She was able to speak the whole alphabet by the time she was 16 months old. He is trying to get his program into production so anyone can teach babies how to read. Photo: John Greenwood

He published a booklet of inspirational quotations earlier this year, called, "Seeds of Greatness," and spoke at graduation ceremonies at Sandburg College in Galesburg and at an Award to Excellence program at Black Hawk College.

On the back of his book of inspirational quotes, Mr. Van De Walle said his life began to slip away in 1994, and he "begged for one more chance to discover true greatness."

In the classroom with third-graders reading their assigned books or at home with his little girls, he believes his chance to give back is through literacy.

"Our true greatness lies within the seeds we have planted in others," he said. "The fruits of those seeds are the impact they have on your life and the lives of those around you."