

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: **Columbus Native and Ohio Basketball Hall of Famer Helen Darling Continues Literacy Initiative at Douglas Community Center Amid National Reading Crisis.**



COLUMBUS, OHIO — As communities across the country grapple with declining youth literacy rates, former WNBA player and Ohio Basketball Hall of Famer Helen Darling is returning home to Columbus to help confront the issue directly through her Let's STAY L.I.T. Reading Circuit at the **Douglas Community Center**. On May 12th, Darling will work with youth participating in Month 4 of the center's 5-month Let's STAY L.I.T. literacy initiative — a program designed to increase reading engagement through movement, mentorship, athlete involvement, and culturally engaging literacy activities. The visit comes at a critical moment for literacy nationwide. According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), national reading proficiency rates for fourth graders have continued to decline following the pandemic, with reading scores remaining below pre-2019 levels. Locally, Columbus faces similar challenges. Columbus City Schools recently identified third-grade reading proficiency as a major district priority, reporting that just 34.5% of third-grade students were proficient in reading during the 2022–2023 school year. **Additionally, more than 63% of kindergarten students in Columbus City Schools tested below grade level in language and literacy readiness during the 2024–2025 school year.**

Darling says those statistics reinforce why programs rooted in encouragement, representation, and student engagement matter now more than ever. *“Reading impacts every part of a child's future,”* said Darling. *“When young people struggle with literacy, it affects confidence, academics, and opportunity. I wanted to create a program that makes reading feel active, exciting, and empowering — especially for students who may not see themselves reflected in traditional literacy spaces.”*

Born and raised in Columbus, Darling says bringing the initiative back to her hometown carries special meaning. “Columbus shaped who I am both academically and athletically,” she said. “This city invested in me, and now it's my responsibility to pour back into the next generation.” The Let's STAY L.I.T. Reading Circuit combines literacy instruction with movement-based learning activities, reading challenges, athlete mentorship, and interactive engagement strategies designed to make reading feel more accessible and enjoyable for youth participants.

Throughout the 5-month program, students receive:

- Movement-based literacy activities
- Weekly reading goals and motivation challenges
- Book giveaways and literacy materials
- Athlete-led encouragement and mentorship
- Interactive reading stations and engagement experiences

The Columbus initiative is part of Darling's broader national 30 for 30 Campaign, a literacy-focused effort celebrating the WNBA's 30th anniversary by bringing book access, reading engagement, and athlete-driven educational programming to communities throughout the United States. Media outlets are invited to attend the May 12th activation at Douglas Community Center to capture interviews, student participation, and literacy-focused programming in action.



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