

A Space to Connect

Assistant Principal, Kiley Rikard, believes that every corner of Mill Creek Elementary (Madison City Schools) should foster belonging, and their media center is a prime example. For 17 years, Library Media Specialist Kris Gray has nurtured the media center into more than just a library; it's a hub for connection and cultural exchange. A few years back, when a Japanese mother sought a way to get involved at school, she discovered the perfect space at Mill Creek's library! Though her English was limited, Kris Gray welcomed her warmly and found tasks that transcended language barriers, such as shelving books using the Dewey Decimal System, cataloguing material, decorating bulletin boards, and organizing materials essential to the library's daily running. "We want moms from all cultures to feel welcomed in the library," Gray explains.



Shortly after, other volunteer moms joined in, adding their own creative touches. The moms introduced origami—a craft second nature to them, but that sparked curiosity and cultural awareness among all students. With just one piece of paper, they showed students how beauty can emerge from simplicity. "I hope other moms will come in the library. So very nice and important place for me. I meet many students and teachers and friends. I want to know English and the library and the books helps me learn English," explains Mai Nitta, volunteer mom.

On volunteer days, moms arrive with a bright smile, greeting students cheerfully, and confidently head to the reshelving cart. "My English is not good, but can do anything here. I like this volunteer. I like making crafts, making the decorations, and the librarians are great teachers. My Japanese friend introduced me to this opportunity to volunteer. She went back to Japan, but now I took her place," said Miyuki Shibahara. These moments of service have blossomed into friendships beyond the library walls. Jessica Hernandez, the library assistant and a proud Pacific Islander, understands the power of cultural responsiveness. She maintains connections with families even after they return to their home countries and eagerly learns traditional recipes to honor their cultures. Growing up in a multilingual household herself, Jessica speaks slowly and clearly, ensuring every volunteer understands and feels valued. At Mill Creek Elementary, books build bridges—and so do people!

Dr. Monica Farris, English Learner Specialist, Alabama State Department of Education

