Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: In the Midtown neighborhood of Springfield, the Ujima Literacy Program is helping to improve children's literacy. Ujima, a Swahili word that means collective work and responsibility, is an effort made possible by several organizations. They include Missouri State University, Springfield Public Schools, Springfield NAACP, Springfield Greene-County Library, Parents as Teachers and the Bartley-Decatur Neighborhood Center. Ujima started in summer 2016 as a literacy camp for children in the early grades. Since then, it has grown, and includes a monthly program for infants, toddlers and elementary students. I'm Emily Yeap.

Joining me today to talk about the program is Dr. Shurita Thomas-Tate, Ujima director and associate professor of communication sciences and disorders at MSU, and her graduate assistant Lindsey Lower.

Thomas-Tate.

Thomas-Tate: Ujima really is focused toward increasing kindergarten readiness and the number of students who are reading at proficient level by third grade. I'm a member of the Springfield NAACP and our education chair at the time was Lola Butcher and she brought us the information from a national program that NAACP was sponsoring called NAACP Reads. Together we came up with opportunities to support literacy development and early education in the Midtown neighborhood.

Emily Yeap: On the second Wednesdays of each month, families gather at the Bartley-Decatur Neighborhood Center for literacy nights.

Thomas-Tate: We start with dinner. We try to engage whole families in conversation and discussion and just having an opportunity to utilize good language and communication skills at the dinner table. After dinner, the kids are broken into different groups. In the toddler room, the librarians from Greene County Libraries and a parent educator from Parents as Teachers work with the families and the kids on language and literacy activities. Lots of play stuff. In the early elementary classroom, we have mostly first grade through third grade kids and we also have a librarian who works with that group reading books and doing language-related activities. Then we have the late elementary group. Those are mostly fourth and fifth graders and they work with L.A. Anderson who is with Springfield Public Schools and they do literacy activities and games. Every single student who comes to Ujima on a family literacy nights leaves with a new book.

Emily Yeap: The summer program is more intensive.

Thomas-Tate: We target kids who are demonstrating lags in their development for language and literacy. These kids are enrolled in summer school with Springfield Public Schools and the ones who are targeted as having low skills come and do intensive three weeks of literacy with us half a day.

Emily Yeap: Lower has helped with the programs since summer 2017. She has seen its positive impact firsthand on children's lives.

Lindsey Lower: I have seen a lot of growth in just the short time that I've been there and the students that come. I've worked with several different children reading one on one with them and to see how much they enjoy reading at this point and how much motivation that has given them, it's been great.

Emily Yeap: Thomas-Tate shares a couple of success stories.

Thomas-Tate: I talked to the parents of two of my favorite little two year olds, who have been in the program for about a year, and their two year olds have favorite books that they love to read over and over again, because they have now that literacy experience and their parents were saying how they did not recognize that their two year old could love literacy so much. We also see great growth in the engagement with our older kids too. We have one little girl who's been coming to all of our programs since the first summer. She calls Ujima her book club and she invites other kids to come to book club with her. Recently she's done some video book reviews for us. This little girl in particular told us that her test scores in her school went up to grade level where they weren't up to grade level and the mom attributes that to her participation with Ujima.

Emily Yeap: Another benefit of Ujima is enabling MSU students to work with children from diverse backgrounds.

Thomas-Tate: Ujima provides me the opportunity to bring my students into this Midtown neighborhood environment that kind of feeds from Boyd Elementary and Weller Eementary schools, which both have high populations of African-American kids and other minority groups, as well as a high population of kids from poverty backgrounds. It's one thing to talk about those things in my classroom, but to bring my students to this environment that gives them the opportunity to put it into practice is so valuable to me, and I think also valuable to my students. In our growing diverse country, in our growing diverse communities there will be more and more need for culturally competent clinicians to work with students and persons from different backgrounds, and I think this is helping me to feel like I am training them better to work with those populations.

Emily Yeap: To find out how you can get involved with Ujima, contact Thomas-Tate at 417-836-6878. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.