

From actor to child literacy advocate

September 09, 2014 1:00 AM Jamie Logan
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LeVar Burton takes time for a selfie with student Kody Low at a Tulane University Campus Programming (TUCP) event on Monday (Sept. 8) in McAlister Auditorium. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

The popular dialogue on education reform in New Orleans took a national turn Monday (Sept. 8) as noted actor LeVar Burton took the stage in McAlister Auditorium on the Tulane University uptown campus.

Burton, best known for his role as host of the PBS television children's series "Reading Rainbow" and his work on *Roots* and *Star Trek*, was raised in a household of educators. From an early age, he learned to love literature with a passion that would last a lifetime.

"The thing that has always sustained me, through good times and bad, is my relationship to books," said the acclaimed actor, who, at 13, planned to become a priest. "I used to have a recurring dream," he said, "that I was reaching people with

my message.”

For 25 years, the dream was fulfilled as he shared a passion for literacy with the youth of the nation via “Reading Rainbow.” Now he has a recurring role as a college dean on the TV show “Perception.”

When “Reading Rainbow” was cancelled in 2009, Burton and partner Mark Wolfe strove to re-launch it just three years later in an entirely new format.

“We took a very successful television show and reinvented it as a tablet experience for kids on the iPad and Kindle Fire,” said Burton.

In what he called “the perfect mix of nostalgia and altruism,” viewers raised \$6.4 million during a Kickstarter campaign this year. Because of this, the app will be available soon on gaming consoles, android systems and other devices.

Burton explained that the key to literacy improvement lies in reading to children and incorporating their passions into reading. These small steps, he believes, could become the impetus for a literacy revolution.

“But?” Burton concluded with one of his most memorable lines, “You don't have to take my word for it.”

Jamie Logan is a sophomore majoring in English, psychology and early childhood education at Tulane University.

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