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Singing a new song for children's literacy

by Chris Slattery

Staff Writer

Morgan Freeman did it. Levar Burton. And George Carlin, too. So it's kind of nice that Richie Havens has signed on to take his turn hosting a new kind of educational children's show. (It's probably safe to assume Carlos Santana doesn't really need the money.)

Havens won't be riding the rails with Thomas the Tank Engine or donning Barney's purple dinosaur suit. But he will be addressing children through song and story, bringing the joy of learning and telling a tale or two. The former folkie from Greenwich Village will star as "Mister Word Wizard" on public access television, lending his distinctive voice to what its creators are calling a new educational technology: the Read Speak technique,

featuring Action Captions.

"It's a dynamic, organic way of introducing the written word," says William Kirksey, co-inventor of the technique along with Kyle Morris.

"Speech carries nuances – tone, pitch, direction. It's a three dimensional experience.

"Read Speak is a graphic impression of speech. And if we show children text in an organic way, it becomes part of their reality."

Of course, before it becomes part of anyone's reality in a major way, the Read Speak technique — and "Mister Word Wizard" — has to become part of their television viewing. After all, as the program's producers point out, the average American child watches four hours of television a day. Making that time more productive is a concept in which most

parents have a vested interest.

Like Jere Silber of Wheaton. When his daughter Morgan, now 9, was younger, he'd use standard video fare to keep her occupied while he wrote screenplays. One day Morgan asked her dad why he never wrote stories for kids — and he was quick to pick up the challenge.

"That turned me on to working for kids," says Silber, the producer of "Mister Word Wizard," which was filmed in the Rockville studios of Montgomery County Television.

"Everything about it is about teaching kids," he explains. "It's positive stuff; each show teaches a different aspect: how to share, how to be kind, how to love. Each episode carries a moral value."

Using children's programming to teach manners and morals is nothing

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Submitted photo

A wizard with words: Legendary recording artist Richie Havens is taking on a new role.