

Reading To Kids

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by Julia Frey

Continuing Helen's lead on getting the word out on various community service and volunteer programs around our great city, (read her posts [here](#) and [here](#)) I would like to introduce you to Reading to Kids. Yesterday was my second time as a volunteer reader and I had a great time.

Their mission statement: *Reading to Kids is a grassroots organization dedicated to inspiring underserved children with a love of reading, thereby enriching their lives and opportunities for future success.*

Reading to Kids (a non-profit group) currently operates at six elementary schools:

Gratts El (The program started here in 1999.)

Esperanza El (Since March 2000)

Magnolia El (Since March 2001)

Hoover El (Since June 2006)

Politi El (Since November 2006)

White El (Since April 2007)

On the second Saturday of every month, Reading To Kids gathers about 750 children and 280 volunteers at these six schools. As a volunteer reader you can request a specific grade to read to and when you arrive at your school, you are paired with another volunteer reader. Together you read the assigned book to the class and discuss it (there are plenty of great guidelines to help you discuss each book and subject matter), then you and the kids make a craft, based on some aspect of the book you just read. When dismissal time comes, each child gets a book of their own to take home.

The books being read are different every month and are chosen by the teachers at each school. Yesterday I was with third graders and we read *The Three Questions* by Jon J Muth. This beautifully illustrated book is based on a short story by Tolstoy and had some very sophisticated topics. Some of it went over the kids' heads, but they still seemed engaged in the bigger themes and characters.

The great thing about this program is that it is more than just inspiring kids to read. It reaches out to their families and the whole community. While the children are in "class" being read to and creating crafts, their parents receive training on how to encourage their children to read at home. The book give-away at the end of the session is significant as "60 percent of low-income homes do not have age-appropriate reading materials for children." The school libraries also receive donations of all the books read during the program that month. "Since its inception, Reading to Kids has given more than 40,000 books to children who attend the reading clubs and donated more than 6,600 books to school libraries."

"Since my children began with the program, they have been motivated to read. Not only has it been a positive influence on my children, but also the parent classes have given me techniques to help my children at home on how to motivate reading. My children and I have learned the value of reading. I hope this program continues, because it has provided the families with support on reading in English." – Graciela Arana, Parent

I learned about this program through my friend Debra (Thanks Debra!) who learned about it the LA Times Festival of Books. We've been to Gratts El both times now. Being "veteran readers" this month, we paired up to read to our third grade class. But let me tell you about last month when we read to first graders. Since we were both new then, we had an orientation session with one of the teachers at the school. Then we were teamed up with a veteran reader/volunteer and got a chance to look over the book and prepare some crafts (all craft materials are provided, but they encourage you to bring additional supplies if you can.)

When it was time to read, we lined up with our students and walked over to our classrooms to begin the morning program. First we had an icebreaker and everyone said their name and a little something about ourselves. Okay, this is not super easy when you are starting with six and seven year olds. So we pressed on, asking them who their teacher was and if they liked to read. Then it was time to start reading. The other volunteer and I took turns reading pages from our book *Officer Buckle and Gloria* by Peggy Rathmann

The kids in my group last month were Sky, Anabel, Daisy, Hector, Linda, Jorge, Ana and her 3 year old cousin Diego. They were fantastic. Once we got rolling, they began to loosen up and respond when asked questions about the book and what we were reading along the way. The program is designed to inspire kids to read more and also to improve language arts. Most kids at Gratts are Latino and are being taught in English and so the idea for us volunteers is not to have the kids read, but to improve their listening and communication skills. (This is totally appropriate for me since I'm not shy and quite happy to yak away!)

After the book reading was done, it was time for crafts. We had decided to have the kids make their own safety books (inspired by Officer Buckle's safety lessons to the kids in the book). So each child drew pictures and glued in shapes that the other volunteer and I cut out (stars, etc). This is when the kids really started chatting! Diego, only 3, was drawing lots of circles and Ana, his cousin, found some yarn and made him a bracelet with stars on it. Nice! Jorge didn't want to draw anything I suggested until I said, what do you like to draw? POWER RANGERS! Go for it Jorge! He did, and boy did he draw a nice power ranger. Sky drew her house full of hearts and labeled them Mom and Dad. Sweet. Everyone kept saying "Teacher! Teacher!" and would show me what they had done. When the crafts were done and cleaned up and the take home books given to each student, we returned to the auditorium for a raffle giveaway of a new laptop computer. This was a huge deal and very exciting. While we were waiting, we sat on the floor with our students and Ana told me that Diego wanted me to read his new book to him. Um, Okay!! So I read his book to him and he just sat there and listened very patiently. As did Ana. More reading! Nice.

Our reading session to third graders yesterday was a bit easier to start as they are more willing to talk and interact. Debra and I read to Kenneth, Rosa, Olga, Brenda and Gisela. We talked about favorite animals and wise people we go to for answers. Kenneth mentioned his cousin who "works in science" that he goes to for answers to his tough questions. Our crafts for the day were to make kites and masks. There were plenty of supplies (Thank you again Debra) for each child to make a couple of things and they seemed to enjoy the stickers and stamps quite a bit. And yesterday, along with the book to take home, each child got school supplies (a folder and binder paper) to take home as well.

We got there at 9am and were gone by noon. It doesn't take a lot of time and they also provide breakfast, usually some fruit and bagels or pastries and juice. It amazes me how a very small amount of my time (3 1/2 hours per month) and effort can contribute to the continuing education to students in Los Angeles. That's a powerful thought.

I highly recommend signing up for this if you can spare one Saturday morning a month. If not, there are other ways you can help on their website.

(All quotes and photos from the Reading to Kids website.)