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Volunteers help read to kids

Molly Peterson

December 16, 2008

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As part of KPCC's Season's Givings series, Molly Peterson has a profile of the "Reading to Kids" organization. The group holds monthly reading clubs at which volunteers read to kids of various ages.

Molly Peterson: I'm Molly Peterson – with Season's Givings.

[Kids talking in Spanish in a school cafeteria]

Peterson: Some volunteer tasks are as simple as they sound. Like Reading To Kids. Jessica Tritsch manages the program.

Jessica Tritsch: We do reading clubs on the second Saturday of every month at eight different elementary schools in the L.A. area all just west of downtown, and so every month we work to recruit 500 different volunteers, an average of about 1,200 kids, to come to the reading clubs to celebrate literacy and have fun reading.

Peterson: On *this* Saturday, Tritsch is at Hoover Elementary School, in the Pico Union neighborhood. She and other Reading To Kids managers train volunteers – briefly – before the main event.

B.J.: Make sure you don't lose any kids. You gotta bring back at least as many kids as you take with you.

Peterson: Tritsch likes working with public schools.

Tritsch: We count on the teachers to help us pick some really good books.

Peterson: Teachers help out on Saturdays, too. Hoover principal May Arakaki says she values the volunteers.

May Arakaki We're not doing too well in terms of our advanced and proficient readers in the school. We're about 20 percent like in an average in 3rd grade, which is not good. So anything that encourages out kids

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to understand that reading is such an important aspect of their education I think is very good.

Peterson: Not surprisingly, Reading To Kids attracts younger volunteers with busy schedules.

Hana Roberger Suler: My name is Hana Roberger Suler.

Riley Ray: My name is Riley Ray.

Peterson: It's Roberger Suler's first time here. so she's paired with a more experienced volunteer. Riley Ray is in reality TV.

Hana Roberger Suler & Riley Ray: He brought backpacks for them to take home, tambourines, the key is, you hit the 99 cent store, and you're all set, for 20 bucks you give these kids an educational experience. I've got some backpacks, some tambourines, I've got this cool drum that when you spin it, it makes a sound.

Riley Ray: Look, if you want people to open up you give them activities. On reality TV generally that's a hot tub and something to drink. With these kids, it's all about selling the book and making the reading seem fun.

Even if we're not the most committed and motivated when we first come here, usually two or three times down the road we're the ones telling everybody else about it. The soft sell, that's how we get them in.

Peterson: Two volunteers guide five kids each to classrooms around Hoover Elementary.

Suler and Ray (reading): And the special tree that is their? What do you think? Their friend. Very good, their friend.

Peterson: Reading To Kids yields another benefit for the students' families. The school's bilingual staff runs educational programs for parents too.

["El resume, en ingles. So this letter, the letter of presentation, is basically kind of like a resume when you apply for a job. That's how I see it. Una carta de invitacion..."]

Peterson: Jonathan Ito's dad once taught at Hoover. Now he coordinates Reading To Kids at the same school.

Jonathan Ito: It's amazing how much you can tell that the kids really, really look forward to us reading to them. And to us, it's a once in a month thing. And in the weeks between the reading clubs, we almost kind of forget about it. But – it really makes a big difference to them.

Peterson: You can find the short volunteer application and more online at ReadingToKids.org.



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