

Reading to Kids unites students and children from L.A. elementary schools

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While most students slept in Saturday morning, Sarah Cox woke up early to read. A handful of fifth graders sat in rapt attention before her.

Nearby, other groups of children listened to pairs of college students tell stories of unfamiliar people in faraway lands as part of Reading to Kids, a nonprofit program designed to imbue youngsters with the joy of reading.

Saturday was Cox's first trip to White Elementary School. The second-year music history student went with 11 other members of the national honor society Alpha Lambda Delta and Phi Eta Sigma, which has been participating for the past few years.

Pairs of volunteers partnered with groups of children to read a preselected book in this month's theme, "New People, New Places, New Things," which featured adventures in India, sub-Saharan Africa, China and the fantastical world of "The Phantom Tollbooth." After reading, the children completed an arts and crafts project based on the book.

Co-founded by UCLA alumni Jonathan Tomlin and Jason Axe in 1999, Reading to Kids visits eight L.A. elementary schools on the second Saturday of every month. The schools are generally located in underprivileged areas in which many children speak English as a second language, said Karen Kiss, the program's managing director.

"It's a really good opportunity for these volunteers to go to a part of town they wouldn't normally go to," Kiss said. "We're all one community, ... and it's important for us all to embrace each other and cross those boundaries."

Katelyn Lee, the co-service chair of Alpha Lambda Delta and Phi Eta Sigma, said she was struck by the difference between the children's experiences and her own.

"When I was a kid, I was never in want of anything," Lee said. "I always had books to read, I always had a parent to help me with homework. When I was interacting with these kids, I realized they didn't have these experiences. ... It's a big thing for them to just get one single book, which is something I took for granted."

At the end of the morning, the children each received a "prize book" to take home and build up their personal libraries, Kiss said. The books read aloud by volunteers are donated to the school's library so the children can read them again. Since its inception, the program has given more than 92,000 prize books and donated more than 16,500 hardcover books to school libraries.

"Our main objective is not a reading program per se; it's not teaching kids how to read," Kiss said. "It's a far more ethereal and less tangible goal but more important – it's to inspire the love of reading. That's something that once somebody has ... it never goes away."

UCLA students from various organizations have been integral members of the enterprise from the beginning, serving as examples of people who have continued their love of reading through life to pursue a college education.

"As an honors society, we're concerned with anything related to academics or education," Lee said. "Obviously, it was a big event that encourages academic success."

More than a mere educational experience, the program fosters a nurturing bond between both generations of students through a shared passion for reading. In a once-a-year event on Saturday, the volunteers held a raffle for a donated computer. When the announcer called the name of one of Cox's students, he jumped out of his seat in his excitement.

"After doing that event (on Saturday), it reminds me of how much I'm interested in serving others," Cox said. "It's just a piece of who I am."