

Reading Program Brings Cheer

BY: AUBREY MANAHL/NOV 24, 2003

In 1999 volunteers teamed with Gratts Elementary School in Los Angeles to create a program dedicated to encouraging children to read. Originally the Gratts Reading Club, it eventually evolved to the organization known today as Reading to Kids.

"Our program was established with the simple goal of encouraging children in underserved communities to read for pleasure, knowledge and self-improvement," said Maryanna Abdo, program director of Reading to Kids.

Aside from Abdo, who works as a full-time staff member, the program is run entirely by volunteers. Every second Saturday of the month, they meet at one of the four schools that have become a part of the Reading to Kids program. The event begins at 8 a.m. and lasts until approximately noon. During this time, the volunteers read to the kids, and at the end of every session, the kids have an opportunity to complete the craft designated for that day. As a prize for coming to the meeting, each child is given a book to take home to share with their family and friends, "Prize Books," as they have come to be called.

Reading to Kids began in May 1999 with eight volunteers, 20 children and one school. In March 2000, the program consisted of two schools and in October 2002 it increased to three schools. As of today, Reading to Kids has expanded to 650 children, 200 volunteers every month and has become a part of four elementary schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District: Gratts, Esperanza, Magnolia and Noble. The program has given away 18,000 paperback books to children and 3,200 hardback books to school libraries.

"We are just going through this major expansion," Abdo said. "We have laid a foundation and now we need to cement it."

Since the majority of the children who participate in the program are of Latino origin (usually from El Salvador, Guatemala or Mexico), one of the program's goals is to provide kids with the confidence and skill to read and understand English. The program also hopes to influence kids so they look upon reading as an enjoyment. Furthermore, it will set a solid foundation for future success in their lives.

"We aim for our reading clubs to involve children on an ongoing basis, so that our programming is an anticipated and exciting part of the month. If children learn to approach reading as an enjoyable pursuit, they will be more likely to continue reading at or above grade level, and eventually move on to more successful academic experiences in junior high school and high school," Abdo said. "Further, as children are exposed to our volunteers, many of whom are college students and young professionals, they begin to think about and plan for their own academic futures."

In a parent survey conducted by Reading to Kids, 90 percent of the parents said that they often saw their children reading their prize books at home, and 100 percent agreed that their kids' enthusiasm for reading increased following their participation in the reading clubs. To celebrate the upcoming holidays, Reading to Kids plans to hire four Santa Clauses, one for each school. He will pass out the prize books in addition to raffling off computers for the schools. The holiday festivals are planned for Dec. 13, the second Saturday of the month.

Reading to Kids is a program that will continue to expand as more individuals discover the benefits of it.