

Reading To Kids wants to enrich young lives

BY DARLENE DONLOE
Contributing Writer

Reading to Kids is not only an admirable thing to do, it's also the name of a grassroots organization that is dedicated to inspiring underserved children with a love of reading, thereby enriching their lives and opportunities for success.

Reading to Kids began with a small group of volunteers, teachers and administrators who shared the dream of improving reading skills among the elementary school children of Los Angeles.

The seed was planted when the principal of Gratts Elementary School just west of downtown said one of the things teachers would like to do more of is read out loud, but, unfortunately, there was never enough time.

In May 1999, a program was developed at Gratts that would emphasize learning and reading in an interactive and fun environment. At the time it was called the "Gratts Reading Club."

The success and growth of that reading club led to the formation of Reading to Kids later that year.

The success of Reading to Kids is due to the Reading Club format — reading aloud to children consistently.

From a start of only eight volunteers reading to 20 children at one school, Reading to Kids has grown to an average of 287 volunteers reading to an average of 554 children prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and an average of 79 volunteers reading to an average of 198 children during the pandemic at reading clubs that take place on the second Saturday of every month at eight Los Angeles elementary schools.

Since its beginnings, Reading to Kids has given 182,199 prize books to children who attend the reading clubs, and donated 33,843 hardcover books to school libraries, while its volunteers have spent 225,102 hours reading to kids.

Charlie Orchard, 55, has been the managing director of Reading to Kids

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A volunteer reads to a group of school children on a Saturday morning as part of the Reading to Kids program. The program, currently offered virtually due to the pandemic, involves about 200 students a year at eight Los Angeles elementary schools.

Courtesy photo Courtesy photo

since 2012. An admitted reading enthusiast, Orchard, who has been with the organization since 2004, was first a volunteer with the organization, along with his wife, whom he met at a book club.

"My wife was looking for a volunteer opportunity that we could do together when Reading to Kids popped up," said Orchard, who earned a bachelor's degree in English from Indiana University and a master's in education from Cal Poly Pomona. "She continues to volunteer with us."

Orchard describes Reading to Kids as "an organization that organizes volunteers who love to read to children and are discovering they love reading, too."

He said Reading to Kids is different from similar organizations because of its approach and focus.

"A lot of others focus on the mechanics of reading with an eye toward students meeting or exceeding grade levels or developing techniques for the way they read," Orchard said. "Our organization is focused more on the affective. We are trying to share the love of reading. Anyone who reads out loud to students feels that. Other programs measure reading skills. The kids don't get time to just enjoy."

Orchard added: "No matter what you're reading, you're going to dis-

cover something about the world, yourself or the history of the world.

"When you create an environment where books are enjoyable, then books move from being assigned to being sought out," he said. "For a lot of children, books can end up being more of an assignment. We don't want our program to feel like school."

Reading to Kids wants children to discover the joy of reading.

The organization relies on its volunteers, considered the lifeline of the organization, to convey that sentiment.

Volunteers must be 18. They work together month after month to touch the lives of others and encourage children to become better readers.

Volunteer support from companies, school groups and other organizations is particularly essential to the success of the program.

The monthly reading clubs do not require a major commitment. Volunteers can choose to volunteer at a reading club whenever their schedules permit.

The ultimate goal of Reading to Kids is to inspire underserved children with a love of reading.

"We achieve that primarily by reading enthusiastically," Orchard said. "Most people can relate to an experience of people being enthusiastic or not. The experience with the

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enthusiasts is a much more enjoyable experience."

A former high school English teacher, Orchard, who left teaching high school so he could teach people how to teach online, said even then he "strove to be as effective as I could. With 37 teens in a room at a time, I chose to make it valuable."

Each week for the last 22 years, Reading to Kids volunteers have read an appropriate book to children kindergarten through fifth grade. All of the books that are read are in English.

According to Orchard, no book has been read twice in the organization's 22-year history.

"We have read 1,600 different titles," he said.

For consistency, the reading clubs continue even through the summer.

"We have never missed a month," Orchard said. "Well, March and April of 2020 we missed. The pandemic shut the schools down so, in May 2020, we went virtual."

"Unfortunately, we can't take on any new volunteers right now because we are Zooming into children's homes. We are only using the volunteers we've been working with over the years. But we will need more volunteers when the pandemic is over."

Kids, parents, teachers and school libraries receive book donations at the end of the reading clubs. These are important donations, as 60% of low-income homes do not have age-appropriate reading materials for children.

Pre-pandemic, on the second Saturday of every month, children voluntarily gather for what Orchard said one child described as "a book party at school."

The Saturday morning program is about 90 minutes long. Refreshments are served.

Volunteers arrive at 9 a.m. and are usually done by noon. The kids are paired with volunteers at 10 a.m. The kids then go off with volunteers in

groups of five or 10 with two or three adults. During the 90-minute session, one book is read — sometimes twice. Only the volunteers read out loud, not the children.

"The books are chosen by the teachers at partner schools because they are the experts," Orchard. "There are so many excellent children's books. We buy the books from Amazon. We might buy 60-70 to give away. The children receive a different book than the one that was read that day."

The books that are read aloud are always hard copies and are donated to the school afterward.

"We've given 33,843 books to school libraries since 1999," Orchard said.

All of the participating schools are near downtown Los Angeles.

"They are in economically struggling areas of the city," Orchard said. "They need it the most. Some of them could be struggling with reading test scores."

Reading to Kids (readingtokids.org) is right in Orchard's wheelhouse.

"I was always a reader as a kid," he said. "I remember reading 'Bambi.' I cried."

"I read 'The Thousand and One Nights,' also known as the 'Scheherazade Tales.' I remember my aunt and uncle, who would only give me books as gifts, gave me a book that started, 'It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.'"

"Obviously, it was 'A Tale of Two Cities.' That right there confused me. How could it be the best and the worst of times? Now, the only gifts me and my wife give are books."

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After-school center adds bullet-resistant materials

BY CYNTHIA GIBSON
Contributing Writer

SOUTH LOS ANGELES — Students studying at an after-school tutoring center will be a lot safer from injury or death from a stray bullet thanks to a \$23,000 donation that will go toward the installation of bullet-resistant materials on the exterior of the building.

The Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center occupies six buildings on Western Avenue in an area that has seen a surge in gunfire between rival gangs. The center has been hit by stray bullets at least five times since 2018.

The donation will cover the cost of removing the windows located on the building's front and replacing them with walls insulated with bullet-resistant Kevlar.

The center's wooden doors will be replaced by iron doors.

"Our student's safety is our number one priority," said Wooten Center Executive Director Naomi McSwain. "When we came back after being closed during the pandemic and found bullet holes in the building, we knew our reopening upgrades had to include safety from COVID and bullets."

With a donation from radio station KROQ FM and \$8,000 of their own funds, the Wooten Center installed bullet-resistant windows on three of the buildings. The center also reinforced the entry door with Kevlar insulation. When the money ran out of money, McSwain and her team used a metal file cabinet (per a



Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center Executive Director Naomi McSwain explains the required retrofits needed to reinforce the center from stray bullets. The after-school learning center has been hit by stray bullets at least five times since 2018. It recently received a \$23,000 donation to cover the costs of installing bullet-resistant materials to the building's exterior.

Photo by Cynthia Gibson

YouTube video) and three sheets of plexiglass removed from one of the buildings to fortify their computer lab.

McSwain was hopeful that Los Angeles County would be able to provide funding for after-school safety, but the county

had its own funding shortfall. She expressed her frustration during a Zoom call with members of the Community Response System of South Los Angeles, a safety net organization founded at the start of the pandemic.

Robert Sausedo, president of

the nonprofit Community Build and co-founder of the Community Response System, asked McSwain to send him a proposal with her request.

"This was unacceptable," Sausedo said. "Students, educators and volunteers in a learning

center shouldn't have to live in fear of being killed by a stray bullet."

He forwarded McSwain's proposal to one of his donors and asked for help on behalf of the Wooten Center. After touring the facility, the donor organization,

along with the board member, wrote checks to cover the cost of the retrofit. Installation of the Kevlar reinforcements is scheduled to be in February.

Ironically, the Wooten Center was created in response to the perils of gang violence. In January 1989, Alton "Dunnie" Wooten Jr., 35, was killed in a drive-by shooting near Adams and Crenshaw boulevards. The murder was said to be the result of a gang initiation. His mother, Myrtle Faye Rumph, channeled her grief into action and in 1990 she opened the Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center.

"What they need is love and attention," Rumph said about South Los Angeles youth. "They need to stay busy. They need to have more confidence. They need to have their attitudes changed. If somebody had taken more time with the person who killed my son, maybe my son would still be alive."

Rumph retired in 2009 at age 79. In 2010, President Barack Obama named her one of 13 recipients of the Presidential Citizens Medal, the nation's second-highest civilian award, for her work founding the Wooten Center. Rumph died in 2015.

The Wooten Center provides free after-school and low-cost summer programs to help students in grades 3-12 attain grade-level proficiency and promotion, high school graduation and college entry and career guidance. The Wooten Center serves more than 400 students per year at its location on Western Avenue and satellite locations.

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