

A Reading Pal is a Toddler's Best Friend

by Maren Symonds

One of my fondest memories from early childhood was sitting on my mother's lap as we explored the wonderful world of Dr. Seuss. Even before I could read, I knew all about a Cat in the Hat, a Grinch who stole Christmas, and an elephant named Horton who discovered Whoville. Beyond the obvious pleasure of my mother's undivided attention, I got a head start on literacy skills – matching sounds to pictures, learning the alphabet, and building my vocabulary.

Early childhood experiences have a lasting impact on a child's success in school and in life. Research tells us that by age 3, children born to college-educated parents have 2-3 times the vocabularies of children whose parents did not complete high school. The literacy gap widens when one accounts for economic hardship, English language learning, and other developmental risk factors. Absent intervention, too many children enter kindergarten with a performance impediment that only gets worse with passing years.

Adelante Mujeres is turning the tide in Washington County. Their bilingual pre-school builds literacy skills while fostering the necessary social and emotional development for kindergarten. Through a Reading Pals program, energetic toddlers get special attention from community volunteers as they take a stroll through the pages of their favorite children's books.

OCF Grant Turns Boomers Into Pals

In 2008, the Oregon Community Foundation chose Adelante Mujeres to field one of three pilot projects aimed at stimulating volunteerism among baby boomers. An enterprising collective of boomers took an interest in the Early Childhood program. They wanted to have a direct impact on kindergarten readiness.

The early childhood classes have a prescribed nap time during which students replenish their energies while teachers take care of other responsibilities. Kids who don't feel like napping need to sit quietly until the next scheduled activity. Boomers saw this interlude as an opportunity to work with children on their English language skills while continuing to honor the teacher's administrative time. *Enter Reading Pals!*

The program model is simple. A lead volunteer coordinates activities for Early Childhood Reading Pals. She touches base with the teacher to find out what has been happening in the classroom and identify special needs. They set goals and expectations for upcoming sessions and talk about activities suitable for volunteer engagement. In turn, the lead works with other volunteers to relay the teacher's input, discuss the kids' responses to different teaching methods, and set lesson plans for the day.



While the group size varies, volunteers work each shift in pairs. Adelante Mujeres has had the good fortune attracting retired educators, a speech pathologist, a children's book author, and

other experienced volunteers to the program. They are intimately familiar with the children's developmental capabilities and have the wherewithal to bring out the best in each child. These "veterans" often partner with early childhood "newbies" to leverage their skills and wisdom. Team teaching also sustains continuity for the children when one of their regular Reading Pals misses a session.

Other boomers engage in direct service by supplying enrichment activities. Students have seen magic shows, visited with police officers, played with baby farm animals, and enjoyed interactions with musical guests. Boomers also support the Raising a Reader program by restocking the children's book bags and providing books on CD.

Pals Transform Kids into Readers



With the expansion in boomer volunteerism, Adelante Mujeres is continuing to build a reputation for excellence in early childhood development. In Spring 2012, eleven out of twelve students met or surpassed benchmarks for English language competency based on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. One hundred percent of their students showed improvement on the PALS-PreK assessment. The latter measures name writing ability, alphabet recognition, letter sound production, print and word awareness, and nursery rhyme awareness. As Adelante's Carrie Schmid notes: "We would not have had this success without the extra support of boomers assisting in the classroom and spending time one-on-one with students as part of the Reading Pals program."

Numbers alone fail to capture the difference that boomers have made. Five-year-old Juan Carlos could easily have added his name to a long list of children who feel disconnected from school. A two-year veteran of the Reading Pals program, he began his journey as a shy toddler with very limited literacy skills. With loving care and attention, he has learned his letter sounds and can read a page of English text to his Reading Pal. He loves school and is always interested in listening to stories.

Kids Turn Boomers into Advocates

The boomer volunteer initiative has created a forum for getting the word out about the importance of early childhood education. One boomer led a team of Portland State students in the development of outreach materials and the associated outreach plan. This effort paved the way for increased community awareness and introduced a new generational cohort to the rewards of civic engagement.

Adelante's Reading Pals also count themselves among the ranks of the organization's loyal supporters. They revel in the challenge of creating a playful yet structured learning environment for their exuberant students. And they enjoy the camaraderie among fellow volunteers.



The Full Circle Moment Awaits

Twenty years after the Cat, the Grinch, and Horton entered my life, I sat amidst a class of newly-minted college graduates as Dr. Seuss delivered the commencement address. It was a proud (*and amusing*) moment in my family's life.

As I look to the future, I can't help but wonder who'll inspire Juan Carlos when he receives his college degree. I've no doubt that it will be a proud moment for his family and his Reading Pals.

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