

Reading Program Aims To Hook Kids on Books

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Luring kids away from TV and video games and into reading is hard, especially when they come from homes without a single book.

A group of students centered in the Santa Fe School for the Arts & Sciences were appalled to learn that New Mexico ranks 49th in the nation in literacy. Every year, approximately half of our high school students drop out and 46 percent of our residents are functionally illiterate.

These students designed a program to convince non-readers that reading can be fun. They reached more than 1,000 Santa Fe area students with "Hooked on Books." When they learned some couldn't read well enough to enter a contest, they created a two-week reading camp in July called "Reading Is Magic."

The camp was based on intensive phonics through hands-on activities and games. The kids began as a page, then grew through the ranks to become a knight, prince or princess through playing phonics-based games like Word Jousting, Reading Baseball or Vocabulary Twister. Their achievements were rewarded with royal accessories like crowns, magic wands and swords.

Many of the young readers were from one to two years behind in school and in danger of being held back.

"The kids all grew an average of one year in their reading skills," said Rayna Dineen, the school's principal. "The kids loved it. They did not want to come home."

On Saturday, six Hooked on Books members have been asked to give a TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talk about the literacy program before a crowd of 700 at Albuquerque's National Hispanic Cultural Center. Devoted to "ideas worth spreading," TED is an international nonprofit whose speakers have included Bill Gates and magician David Blaine. The talks are available both on TV and the Web. In Santa Fe, the talk will be simulcast at Flying Star in the Railyard.

The reading program was spearheaded by a wave of positive peer pressure. Last fall, the students formed a steering committee called Youth United, comprised of about 50 youths from across Santa Fe and Los Alamos ranging from ages 14-17. They met every other Saturday. First, they decided they needed prizes to jumpstart learning. They knew once a student grasped the joy of words, their adventures would never stop. A national Albertson's nonprofit program awarded the group \$10,000.

The students met with the Santa Fe Public Schools superintendent, principals and librarians, all of whom jumped on the concept and emailed fliers throughout the schools. Entrants could choose a reading contest based on the requirements and prizes. Once they entered, they received a "Hooked on Books" wristband, Dineen said. The colorful bands soon became collector's items as kids entered multiple contests.

The first prize was an iPad. Other incentives ranged from ice cream coupons to Kindles and skateboards to a free trip to the Los Angeles red carpet premiere of "The Hunger Games."

Working with the struggling students was just the beginning.

"Kids started to tell us, 'We don't have books to read,'" Dineen said. "One kid from Capital (High School) said, 'We've never had a book in our home.'"

Many of their families arrived in Santa Fe speaking only Spanish, she added.

Merari Santos, 14, struggled with reading when he was 10 years old. Now a 10th-grader at the New Mexico School for the Arts, he is one of six speakers slated for the TED talk. Santos worked with younger students at the reading camp.

His parents emigrated to this country from Guatemala, each armed with just three years of schooling.

“I didn’t get the help I needed at home,” Santos said. “My parents didn’t have books. It seemed too hard, because I didn’t have the motivation.”

His life turned around when he read “I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust” by Livia Bitten-Jackson.

“The history part of it shocked me,” he said. “It opened up a new world for me.”

He wanted to ignite that same passion for reading in others.

“They were kind of shy” at first, he said of the campers. “But after I started reading books on the couch and playing games with them, they came every morning.”

Fourteen-year-old Kendra Carmona was motivated by her 10-year-old brother, who also had reading problems. Carmona is a ninth-grader at the New Mexico School for the Arts.

“My little brother doesn’t read much,” she said. But “he participated in this contest. I’ve never seen him complete a whole book. Now he reads more often.

“I grew up not really reading books until I found the first ‘Twilight’ book,” she continued. “I see so many kids down about reading. They just see it as something they do for school and for grades.”

Lauren Sarkissian, 14, also a School for the Arts ninth-grader, said some of the youngsters suffered from disabilities and only needed some one-on-one attention. Sarkissian designed the program logo — a fishhook dangling a book with the caption “Reel in Readers.”

The young tutors watched as their students’ confidence bloomed. No one broke down or drifted off into boredom.

“If kids could read, so many doors and possibilities would be unlocked,” Sarkissian said. “They could get better jobs, they could make more money, there would be less crime. There’s this whole domino effect.

“There’s so many worlds inside books,” said Eugene Matias, 16, also from the School for the Arts. “If you don’t read, you get stripped of the good stuff inside books.”

Group members also donated a barrage of books. They painted bookshelves and installed them in places where kids wait, Dineen explained: the Division of Motor Vehicles, the Christus St. Vincent emergency room, the state’s Children, Youth and Families Department offices, and urgent care and pediatric clinics. Readers can borrow and then donate back to the book pool. Local businesses responded by creating their own lending libraries.

“We hope it will inspire other kids to do their own Hooked on Books program,” Dineen said. “They’re just so excited to be motivated. Between TV and video games, they have so much competition.”

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