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Adult Literacy Learner Recognized During International Literacy Month 2009

Partners in Reading Releases Ninth Book of Learner Writings: "Humor Me...and other stories"

SAN JOSE, Calif. — "Volunteering is not a sacrifice. It is a privilege." That was the sentiment expressed by Maria Torres Gafford, when she accepted a "Special Recognition Award" at an International Literacy Day event held Monday, October 5, at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

Gafford's personal story is remarkable. In 2003, she moved to the U.S. from Mexico, where she had worked as an engineer. Like many new immigrants, Gafford was challenged by the fact that her English language reading and writing skills were at a basic level. She needed the opportunity to practice speaking English and to improve her reading and writing skills.

"*Partners in Reading* gave me that opportunity," she says. "In two years time, I can say that I read much better and can write as well as any high school student. I am a quiet person, but the literacy program has given me much more confidence, so I speak up more and tell everyone about the program."

Partners in Reading is an adult literacy tutoring program run by San José Public Library. Gafford's story might have ended there with her successful integration into American society, but there's more.

"Through my experience with *Partners in Reading*, I have been inspired to do volunteer work," Gafford says, referring to her recent enlistment as an AmeriCorps Member.

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“Now I give back to the community by tutoring parents from a local preschool in speaking, reading and writing.”

Gafford exemplifies the potential for contribution that lies dormant in an estimated 45% of Santa Clara County residents who, if tested, would reveal low level literacy competencies. As many as 16% (or 277,000) do not have sufficient literacy skills to perform basic daily tasks that require reading, writing or the completion of forms (National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003). Another estimated 29% just get by.

For Gafford and other adults, there are free tutoring programs like *Partners in Reading*, Now celebrating its [twentieth year](#) of community service, *Partners in Reading* looks forward to expanding its service to address overwhelming needs for improved reading, writing, critical thinking and computer skills.

Critical to this expansion is a larger pool of engaged community volunteers. Under the guidance of Program Manager Judy Klikun, tutors are redefining their roles, networking together and coming up with new ways to motivate learners. As their ownership of the program grows, so does their advocacy, and it is this that Klikun relies on to move the program forward beyond the traditional one-to-one tutoring model.

As more community volunteers receive training to tutor (and often mentor) adult learners, and more adults and families participate in the program, services will be enhanced and delivered in a variety of ways:

- volunteers will work with pairs and small groups of learners so a greater number of adults can participate,
- independent learning opportunities will be offered to accommodate adults with erratic and unusual schedules, and
- increasing capacity will result from more instruction available at the library branches, as well as partner agencies in San Jose like Work2Future.

In spring 2010, *Partners in Reading* expects to launch the “Work Wise” program. Using funding from the Department of Labor and Industry, it will collaborate with local businesses to provide workplace literacy instruction to incumbent workers. “The objective,”

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Klikun says, “is to increase job proficiency and productivity by improving language and literacy skills required on the job that are embedded in the work itself.”

Coaching and instruction will be provided at the worksite as well as at San José Public Library sites. A mobile computer lab will be available to support skill development. Through “Work Wise,” *Partners in Reading* will expand the vocational literacy program currently offered for preschool teacher’s aides to serve other trades such as the hospitality, fast food and health industries.

The literacy celebration concluded with readings from the newest book of learner writings released this month. Titled “Humor Me...ad other stories,” the book contains a variety of stories from different perspectives, unified by a common thread of humor. Roughly 60 % of adults enrolled in Partners in Reading speak English as a second language. One story reveals the comedic confusion that arises when learned phrases are used incorrectly. Copies of the book are available for checkout through the library’s online catalog at <http://catalog.sjlibrary.org>.

Behind the writers of these stories stand a proud group of volunteer tutors, who meet with their learners three hours a week to guide and support their efforts. To join their ranks and attend the next tutor orientation on **Wednesday, November 4**, or to inquire about other literacy program support opportunities, call Partners in Reading at (408) 808-2361.

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