

The Daily Voice

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LITERACY'S LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES

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By Lynn Selich



I love walking into the Central Newport Beach Public Library. It reminds me of one of my favorite regular outings when I was a little girl: our bi-weekly trip to the local library that my Mom would faithfully undertake with my brother and me. With our very own library cards in hand, we were given carte blanche of the library's children's section. It was one of the rare opportunities we got to go wild – metaphorically speaking – no holds barred to make our own choices. Completely unopposed by the usual parental controls, the experience gave us a great sense of empowerment and looking back, it was fundamental in honing my sense of “the possibilities.”

Lest we raise our mother's eyebrow, or illicit a “shoosh!” from the librarian and spoil the fun, my brother and I would put aside our sibling rivalry for an hour and quietly ponder the plethora of books filled with fantasy and adventure, comedy and drama just waiting for our small hands to reach out and pluck them off the shelves. I would think long and hard about which books to take home, and which could wait until our next visit. We were allowed to choose up to eight books at a time and we always managed to walk out with a pile in our arms up to our chins, grinning from ear-to-ear at our successful hunting and gathering expedition. And looking back, for my Mom, it was a pretty strategic move in terms of getting us to calm down, and quietly sit for a while completely absorbed in our make-believe wonder worlds.

As a result, like most of us, I grew to hold libraries, books and reading in my heart and head with high esteem. As I grew older, they came to represent not only the sharing of intellect and knowledge, but something safe, constant and reliable that began and continued throughout my childhood. My fondly remembered experiences exploring them made me fall in love with words and creativity, the thought process behind writing, and the power and magic of the written word. I suppose it is how and why I am writing this column now.

So when my friend Sue Tucker, who along with her husband Steve, founded the Literacy Project Foundation (LPF) located here in Newport Beach, they asked me to visit Project HOPE (which stands for Homeless Outreach Program in Education), one of the facilities LPF supports with their “Get Set Read!” literacy program, I was naturally intrigued. What I didn't realize was the impact our visit would have on my perception of how many children are not being given the golden gift of literacy that I so cherished growing up. And worse, the negative impact the resulting illiteracy is having not only on their young lives, but the future of our state and indeed our country.

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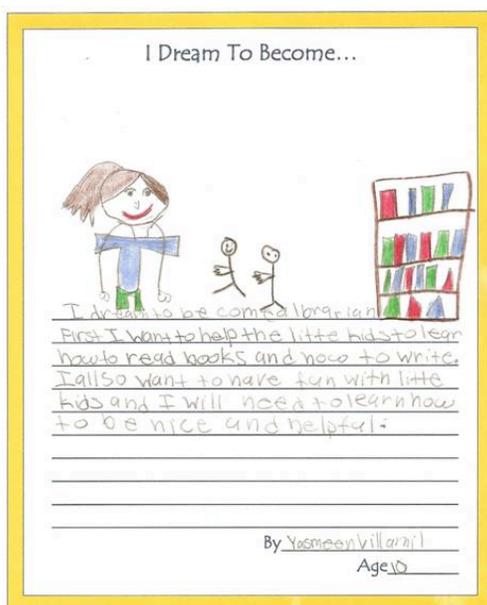
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Sue told me about LPF's support of Project HOPE and after-school programs that use "Get Set Read!," and I asked her where the children at Project HOPE come from. She turned my attention to the data she had provided me outlining the staggering numbers of homeless children right in our own OC backyard. According to the Orange County Department of Education, there are more than 14,000 homeless children in Orange County. And because homelessness is just one of the many incomprehensible challenges these children have to face, they routinely experience gaps in their education, leaving them years behind more fortunate peers. These kids are picked up each day from their motel or shelter by a bus and brought to Project HOPE as a way of filling the gap they experience in their education due to no fault of their own.

As Sue and I drove to a non-descript area of Orange to an equally non-descript, half-occupied strip mall where Project HOPE is located, Sue told me about "Get Set Read!," and how it supplements school reading programs by providing a fun, socially interactive phonics game that teaches in all three learning modalities: visual, tactile and audio. LPF also provides the teacher administrator at no cost to educational institutions. Thanks to LPF, Project HOPE is able to incorporate "Get Set Read!" into their curriculum and not only assist the children to reach their grade level proficiency in reading, but to also enhance their learning through a collaborative group experience while teaching cooperative social skills.

As we arrived, we were escorted to a back room, more like a storage room than a classroom, with a low table surrounded by five children ages 10 and 11 who were engaged in playing the "Get Set Read!" game with their teacher. I could see how the game worked its magic, encouraging them to concentrate and think in a gently competitive and positive way. It clearly provided key phonics skills that some kids should have mastered by this age, undoubtedly essential for adult literacy. I was impressed at their enthusiasm, and it was clear they are smart kids that just need a little extra help.



At the end of our visit, the teacher told us that each of her students had filled out the "Get Set Read!" "dream card" on which they wrote what they wanted to be when they grow up. We went around the room, and each child told us what they had written on their card: One to be a music teacher; another an artist; the next a paleontologist; on to a lawyer; and finally a sheriff (or football player, whichever came first). Some of these kids didn't even know where they would be sleeping that night. It was almost overwhelming for me to listen to them articulate their hopes, and to see that little fire of possibility in their eyes.

When Sue dropped me off, I thanked her for the opportunity to learn first-hand how the Literacy Project Foundation, even in this tough economy, is helping kids

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beat the odds against illiteracy by providing "Get Set Read!" I can't stop thinking about those kids and being a witness to their sincere longing to learn and that little fire in their eyes, and their own desire – not dissimilar to my own – back in the library so many years ago ... to grasp "the possibilities."

Editor's Note: The Literacy Project Foundation will hold its second annual "What Dreams Are Made Of" benefit luncheon on May 20, 2010 at Big Canyon Country Club in Newport Beach. Proceeds from the fundraiser will support the "Get Set Read!" programs in Orange County schools. For more information about LPF, log on to www.literacyprojectfoundation.org or call (949) 721-1319 for event ticket information.

Contributing writer Lynn Selich resides in Newport Beach. Her regular column runs every Monday. She can be reached at lynnselich@roadrunner.com.