



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Our vision, while ambitious, is based on the belief that foundations play a critical role in generating solutions to national problems. We try out innovative solutions to pressing problems in places that appear to be poised for change and with people who are committed to driving that change. We use what we learn to influence change in other places that may never get our money. And we leave as our legacy a public record upon which others can build.”

-Wallace Foundation
website: “Our Approach”

One of the many jobs I’ve had with the Alameda County Library system was as the coordinator for the Family Literacy Program, which is part of the Adult Literacy Program. I worked with the families of adult learners, providing workshops, leading discussion groups and baking lots of letter-shaped cookies.

I also learned a great deal about the importance of reading and writing well. These skills have an impact not only on day-to-day life, such as reading a sign or a pill bottle, but also on employment opportunities and family interactions. In fact, many of the parents I talked to were motivated by the desire to read to their children or help them in their schoolwork.

Since last week was the 20th anniversary of the Alameda County Adult Literacy Program, this seemed like a good time to write about it. To get some current information, I talked to Sherry Drobner, who

has been the director of the program since 1988.

Sherry told me that the program was started in 1984 as part of a statewide California Literacy Campaign, and that Alameda County was one of six libraries to receive grants from the California State Library. The current funding, however, is now a combination of state money and local library money, supplemented by small grants.

Over the years, because of their innovative program, there have been larger grants, too. In 1996, they received a 3-year Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest grant for their work in using small group instruction and their interest in encouraging leadership among the adult learners. Following this grant, the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Foundation expressed interest in supporting their literacy program at Juvenile Hall. This led to three years of funding and the program continues today, with money from the probation department

and the county office of education.

One other component of the Adult Literacy Program is the Reading for Life program at Santa Rita jail in Dublin. Tutors in Reading for Life provide one-on-one tutoring for adult learners at all levels. This program, which has been running since 1989, was originally a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant from the California State Library, but is now jointly funded by the library and the sheriff's department.

Lisa Harris directs this program and many years ago I had the opportunity to work with Lisa. One of my jobs was to assess interested inmates, to see if they fit the guidelines of the program. I will never forget the day I interviewed a young man who couldn't read at all. I asked him how far he had gotten in school and he informed me he had graduated

from high school. I remember how incredulous I was – how could he graduate if he couldn't read? I asked him. Wasn't there some sort of exit exam? Yes, he told me, but the teacher read it to me.

Both of these programs are rewarding and interesting volunteer opportunities. The jails tutoring, in particular, is a good example of what Sherry described as “taking a negative experience and trying to do something positive about it.” If you are looking for some way to make a difference in someone's life, I highly recommend trying it.