



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Throughout America there is a growing sense of urgency about the need for improved literacy skills at home, at school, in the community and in the workplace. This mounting sense of national urgency serves as a call to action for the library profession...”

-From “Advocating 21st Century Literacy,” August 2005 *American Libraries*

Literacy programs have been a part of American public libraries since the beginning. They have changed over the years, however, and will continue to evolve as they try to meet the needs of their students. In fact, even the definition of the word literacy is changing, as the increased use of technology means that a learner’s goal may be to gather information in other ways than simply print. Sometimes the term “information literacy” is used, and this term includes the idea that for information to be useful, it must be found and understood – whether through print or a computer.

There are many different adult literacy programs in the Bay Area and a list of these is available on the Bay Area Literacy (BAYLIT) website at www.literacynet.org/baylit. They are always looking for volunteers, and I can say that from my experience as the coordinator for the Family Literacy program many years

ago, it is a rewarding and exciting experience to help someone gather the skills they need to accomplish their goals.

Lately, one popular way to support adult learners and make the learning interesting is the idea of using book discussion groups. Contra Costa County, San Francisco Public Library and the Alameda County Library system all have ongoing groups as part of their literacy programs. When I went to the San Francisco Public Library’s Project Read site, I found their Wednesday Night Readers, and I noticed that in August they discussed *Horatio’s Drive* by Ken Burns. I also noted that the learners used both a book-on-tape and the book to prepare for the group discussion. This is a popular method of reading the book – one I see with learners of all ages. The tutors then design lesson plans around these discussions, as they strive to help the students develop their vocabulary and language skills through writing

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and talking.

The reason I am telling you all this – besides the fact that these programs are always worth mentioning – is that Sherry Drobner, who is the director of the Alameda County Library adult literacy program, recently told me about an upcoming event that will be a fundraiser for local literacy programs. Four of these – Berkeley, Alameda City, Oakland and Alameda County – have joined with A Great Good Place for Books (in Montclair) to hold a fundraiser at the Jack London Waterfront Hotel on September 22. It is called "Bookies by the Bay" and will include dinner, dessert, wine and – best of all – the guest author Max Tivoli, who wrote *The Path of Minor Planets* and *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*. There will also be an auction, with items donated by local businesses. And since it is sponsored by Books by the Bay, which is a non-profit assoc-

iation of independent bookstore owners, the tickets are tax deductible. The telephone number for more information is (510) 339-8210.

As Sherry put it, this event will not only raise money, but it will give the general public an opportunity to "see the faces of the people who run the programs and also the students who are in the program." And it will help support the critical literacy programs in Alameda county – programs that support reading, which is described by Michael Gorman – the new president of the American Library Association – as "an activity that is routine to most of us, [but] is in truth miraculous and should be cherished and encouraged" ("Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century").