

# Almaden Resident

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## COMMUNITY



Photograph by Zach Beecher

Book Scan: Third-grader Will Wauford looks for words in the new dictionary that he received through the California Dictionary Project. Every third-grader in the San Jose Unified School District received a dictionary through the program. In Almaden Valley, Councilwoman Nancy Pyle distributed the books to Carol Ferro's class at Graystone Elementary School.

## Dictionary day brings more than books

By Lydia Sarraille

The students in Carol Ferro's third-grade class at Graystone Elementary School each received their own dictionary on April 2, courtesy of the California Dictionary Project, which distributed dictionaries to every third-grader in the San Jose Unified School District.

A dictionary may seem a simple thing, but at last year's Dictionary Project day, third-grade instructor Jeffrey Leonard said, "I can remember when we didn't have the Dictionary Project. Before it, I wasn't assured all my kids had a dictionary at home."

Now retired, Leonard added, "I see them now in the fifth and sixth grades, and they still have the dictionary in their backpacks. It's a tool they will keep."

For many students, this is their first dictionary.

Cameron Kemske, 8, who attends Trace Elementary School, said, "If I see a word I don't know on TV, I'll look it up."

While looking up definitions was a high priority, other aspects of the dictionary

held appeal as well.

"I have lots of dictionaries, but this is the first one with Braille," said Emily Greulich, 9. "I want to learn Braille because I might become blind. My parents have glasses and contacts."

The day is more than just about books, said district spokeswoman Karen Fuqua.

"These kids aren't just being handed a book," Fuqua said. "They're hearing real people tell them about the importance of education."

Barry Graynor, president of the California Dictionary Project and an attorney, says he continues to donate his time because of "the joy in the kids' faces. When they receive the books, they're so happy. It really encourages them to learn, and they're very interested in the words and all the stuff that's in the dictionary."

Graynor says community involvement is also important, which is why the group asks for volunteers to distribute the books.

"It means a lot to the kids to have someone from the outside come in from the community," Graynor says. "They see people care."

"The adults enjoy it as much as the kids. It's amazing to go into a classroom. Unless you're a parent you don't normally see inside classrooms. It's an incredible experience."

In San Jose, more than 93 volunteers from 30 groups and firms participated this year.

Graynor came down to San Jose and distributed books at Carson Elementary School. Councilwoman Nancy Pyle distributed books at Graystone Elementary School.

"All the kids said thank you individually," he said. "That's what keeps me going."

Graynor has been active with the project since it's founding in 2002 by Mark Robinson.

No longer actively involved in the project, Robinson was inspired by a *Wall Street Journal* profile of Mary Louise French, who started a similar project in 1992 in South Carolina.

French herself was inspired by the original "dictionary lady," the late Annie Oneta Plummer.

According to Plummer's obituary in a December 1999 edition of the *Savannah*

*Morning News*, she got the idea when she noticed the pupils walking to a nearby elementary school were empty-handed.

Plummer later explained that she felt if the children were given a basic book such as a dictionary, it would stimulate their interest and could change their lives.

Using \$50 of her own money, the ninth-grade dropout bought 30 pocket dictionaries and wrote in the front of each one the United Negro College Fund slogan: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste. I challenge you not to waste yours."

Then, Plummer told one interviewer, "I went to the corner and started giving them out."

After a story by a local news station, Plummer started receiving donations and inspiring others, including French, to start their own dictionary projects.

In California, Graynor and other volunteers solicit funds for the dictionaries from corporations, foundations and individuals. No government funding goes into the project.

For the current school year, Graynor says the project will give away about 18,000 dictionaries to students in San Jose, Campbell, San Francisco, Oakland and West Contra Costa.

More than 75,000 dictionaries have been distributed since the project started.

Graynor hopes donations will increase enough to allow them to expand into the Alum Rock, Franklin-McKinley and Hayward school districts next school year.

Most of the dictionaries distributed are published under French's direction and available to the California project at about \$1.45 each.

The staff of the nonprofit is reimbursed only for expenses, so almost all the monies they raise go into buying more dictionaries.

A \$75 donation translates into dictionaries for 52 children, and \$500 buys books for 340 children.

*For additional information on the California Dictionary Project, visit [www.californiadictionaryproject.org](http://www.californiadictionaryproject.org) or call 415.693.2136.*

*--Mary Gottschalk contributed to this article.*