

Fiercely Local News

Friday, April 13, 2007

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Classifieds: [Real Estate](#) | [Home Services](#) | [Employment](#) | [Vacation & Travel](#) | [Professional Services](#) | [General N](#)
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ADVERTISING

Place an Ad

Online Form

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Religious Directory

GETTING COVERAGE

Local News

Schools

Sports

Post an Announcement

ABOUT US

Contact Information

Circulation

Philosophy

History

Executive Staff

Employment

ARCHIVES

Browse Past Issues

Rose Garden Resident

[Home](#) > [Rose Garden Resident Home](#) > Cover Story

0715 | Friday, April 13, 2007

COVER STORY



Photograph by Zach Beecher

Book Giveaway: District 6 San Jose Councilman Pierluigi Oliverio signs copies of students' dictionaries at Trace Elementary School last week during California Dictionary Project day. Every third-grader in the San Jose Unified School District received a dictionary through the project.

was their first dictionary.

Tatiana said she would be taking hers home to share with her older sister Tiffany.

"I hope it will help," Tatiana said. "Maybe my sister can use it to help us with our homework."

Chris also planned to take his dictionary home to show his older brother Marco.

Katie echoed the intentions of Mateo and Ruby when she said, "I'm going to look up words I don't know and learn more."

Cameron Kemske, 8, 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."

Word Search

Dictionary project comes to Trace

By Mary Gottschalk

The 30 students in Amy Dunn's third-grade class at Trace Elementary School each received their own dictionary on April 2, courtesy of the California Dictionary Project.

For some students, including Ruby Sotelo, 9, Katie Chavez, 10, Chris Avila, 10, Mateo Hernandez, 9, and Tatiana Alviso, 8, this

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Allison Reich, 10, was pleased to find the sign language symbols page.

"I know how to do my name in sign language, but I want to learn more," Allison said.

Will Wauford, 8, saw the new dictionary as a challenge.

"I'm going to see how many words I can find that aren't in this dictionary," Will said.

"I've already found two--*romanflauve*, which is a tale passed down from generation to generation and *upas*, which is a sticky sap."

Will's classmates nodded at him and one said, "He knows a lot of words."

In addition to Dunn's class, every other third-grader in San Jose Unified School District, more than 3,500 in all, received a dictionary.

Community volunteers were on hand to help distribute the dictionaries.

Newly elected District 6 City Councilman Pierluigi Oliverio came to help in Dunn's class.

After asking the students if they were aware of Hoover Middle School across Dana Avenue from Trace, Oliverio introduced himself by saying, "I went to Hoover. I was a Hoover Hawk. Now I work for your city council."

Oliverio said: "Call me Mr. O because my name is too long."

In turn, Oliverio called the students "my friend" when choosing which raised hand to pick.

One of the exercises the class did together was to take the first two letters of their name and find a word in the dictionary that began with the same two letters.

Oliverio skillfully wove the words chip and cable into an explanation of why high tech is important and how it impacts lives through cell phones and computers.

A dictionary may seem a simple thing, but at last year's Dictionary Project day at Trace, 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."

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."

He adds, "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."

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

Graynor came down to San Jose on April 2 and distributed books at Carson 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 9th-grade dropout bought 30 pocket dictionaries and wrote in the front of each one the United Negro 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 stations, 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 ones 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, while \$500 buys books for 340 children.

For additional information on the California Dictionary Project, visit www.californiadictionaryproject.org or call 415.693.2136.