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LITERACY
PARTNERS



SPRING 2017

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HarperCollins Leads
the Way



READING CHANGES EVERYTHING

Dear Friends,

A year ago, it would have been unimaginable to me that we would profile an inspiring student on the cover of our newsletter without using her real name ("Sofía Fernandez" is a pseudonym) or run pictures in which you can't see her face.

But that's how bad it's gotten and there's no way to sugarcoat it: the anti-immigrant climate since the election has been an unmitigated disaster for the families we serve. Our students are living in fear. The bullying tone out of Washington, the scapegoating of good people, the empowerment of white nationalist fringe groups, and immigrant raids that have literally ripped parents from their children are driving our families into the shadows.

It is infuriating, but true, that we therefore need to conceal the identity of one of our most promising students: a young mother who came to Literacy Partners to give her child as strong a start in life as she could. She worked at McDonald's for nine years earning minimum wage, paid her taxes, and has contributed to her community.

In the face of this anti-immigrant fearmongering, Literacy Partners is taking action. We are doubling down on our commitment to families of young children—families who come from all over the world to make New York their home and make the city and its economy what it is today. We provide families with a first-class education to help them achieve their goals and find their voices.

With your continued help, our work is paying big dividends. For example, the children of Sofía's classmates have shown much more improvement on early childhood assessments than their peers in the same Head Start preschool whose parents are not enrolled in Literacy Partners. In fact, the children of our students improved their scores by 22% on average since their parents joined our class, nearly double the rate for all other students (12%).

Literacy Partners stands with all our families. But, we need all the help we can get. I invite you to seize the opportunity to become more involved at this critical time by contacting me at anthonyt@literacypartners.org.

Anthony Tassi

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We strengthen families by
empowering parents through
education. Together, we can
close the achievement gap before
children even begin school.

SOFÍA FERNANDEZ:

Striving for the Next Generation

Some Literacy Partners students have come to the United States in search of an education. But Sofía Fernandez left her education behind, on the outskirts of Lima, in her native Peru. A relative had convinced Sofía's factory-worker mother to stop "wasting" her hard-earned money sending Sofía to college in Peru. The relative said that Sofía would never earn enough money in South America, but that in the United States, high-paying work would be plentiful.

After arriving in New York, Sofía quickly discovered the truth: without speaking English, finding employment would be very difficult. In her first job, at McDonald's, the words "hi," "bye," and the checkout total were her sole means of communicating with patrons—who, she says, yelled at her if they had a problem with the food. She spent the next nine years working 12-hour days, six days a week, as a cashier earning less than \$7 per hour.

Her punishing schedule left Sofía little time to learn English. When she interviewed to work at a deli, in 2011, she simply said "yes" to every question. "I just needed a job and figured I would learn everything there," she says. "I didn't know that I was telling him I could make a cappuccino!"

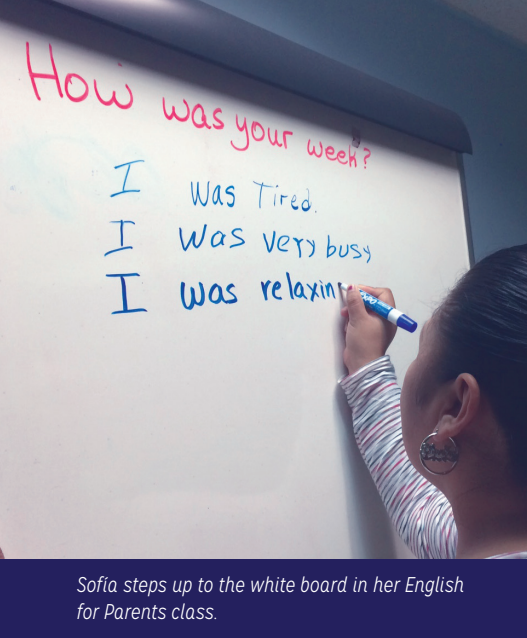
Although the hours at the deli were long and hard, Sofía's luck quickly improved. On her first day, Emilio, a coworker, called her "señora"—the Spanish term of

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A BIG THANKS TO THE DOROTHY STRELSIN FOUNDATION

Literacy Partners is deeply grateful for the Dorothy Strelsin Foundation's generous gift to establish the Dorothy Strelsin Foundation Endowment for the students of Literacy Partners. The Endowment will continue to bring the joy of reading to families across New York City.



Sofia steps up to the white board in her English for Parents class.

Photo: Literacy Partners

Now when people talk to me in English, I feel so proud and happy when I can answer.

respect for an older or married woman. “I’m not married!” was her retort. One thing led to another and they married three years later. “We don’t have a lot of money, but we have a lot of love, me and my husband,” she says.

In September 2016, pregnant with her daughter, now three months old, Sofia anxiously signed up for a Literacy

Partners English for Parents class in the Bronx. “I was thinking of my baby. I wasn’t thinking about me,” she says. “I was thinking about her future.”

The class was immediately helpful. Far from scary, “my teacher, Sari, was lovely,” Sofia says. “By the second class, I already knew a bit.”

Right away, she learned how to introduce herself, say where she’s from, and make her way more easily around New York. “Now when people talk to me in English, I feel so proud and happy when I can answer,” Sofia says, adding that she wishes she could attend class every day.

When Sofia was nervous about her pregnancy, Sari encouraged her to sing to her baby in Spanish and gave Sofia a book, *Olivia*, to read out loud to her. “She hears you,” Sari told Sofia.

Sofia was not read to as a child, because her mother had little time, she says, and she owned few books. So, she was thrilled to receive a free set of books from Literacy Partners for her newborn baby.

Since her daughter, Isabella, was born, Sofia has continued to read to her every day and is delighted to see Isabella’s energetic response. In her class, Sofia learned the simple truth that talking, singing, and reading to her baby will build her brain and give her the strongest possible start in life.

“I dream of a better life for her. I hope she’s going to be a good person, and not have to work as hard as me,” Sofia says. “But here, the most important thing is the language.” ■

MEET LESLEY STAHL: Lifelong Reader and Literacy Partners Supporter

Lesley Stahl, one of America's most accomplished journalists, is celebrating 26 seasons with 60 Minutes. She has supported Literacy Partners yearly since attending our gala in 2001.

Lesley Stahl tells the story of traveling to Europe with her parents when she was in ninth grade: she had lugged her copy of *War and Peace* with her and spent the entire trip buried in her book. "It's the only time my father ever got angry with me," she says. "Here he was showing me the wonders of Europe; he was so frustrated." Stahl fell in love with *Jane Eyre* and the *Little Women* books in junior high. "We didn't watch television at night, ever, and when you went to bed you read," says the 12-time Emmy-winning TV journalist.

Stahl is widely regarded for her global investigative reporting, from the controversies surrounding Guantanamo Bay prison to the Middle East, and, as a former *Face the Nation* host, for her interviews with world leaders including Boris Yeltsin, George H.W. Bush, and Yasser Arafat.

She attended her first Literacy Partners gala in 2001 at the invitation of her friend Liz Smith, and has never stopped supporting the organization. "Every year at the gala, men and women who had benefited from the organization get up and speak. It's always the best part of the evening," Stahl says. "They talk so personally about how they were 30 or 40 and couldn't read, and then how much reading has changed their lives. Their stories are uplifting and hopeful and always make you weep. It grabs your heart. I knew from the first gala this was an organization I wanted to contribute to."

Worlds collided when, in 2015, Stahl reported a *60 Minutes* segment about *Alive 55+ & Kickin'!*, a group of older adults who were fulfilling their lifelong goal of singing on stage. She was amazed to discover that one of the performers was Literacy Partners student Matthew Brown. At 75, Brown had overcome a lifetime of addiction and illiteracy. He spoke at the 2015 gala about his life and dreams of becoming a singer—and then he brought down the house with his rendition of Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

Stahl had no idea that for years she was helping Matthew, her interview subject, pursue his dream of writing his life story. ■



*Moved by her time with her young granddaughters, Lesley Stahl wrote the best-selling book *Becoming Grandma: The Joys and Science of New Grandparenting*.*

Photo: Dave Lauridsen

MARCHETTE, JACKIE, AND THE 30-YEAR QUEST

On a warm summer night last year, 50-year-old Marchette Hellams went online to check her score on the high school equivalency exam she had taken a few weeks earlier. She was hopeful, but realistic: she had failed the math portion of the exam three previous times.

Marchette, who was already a professional singer in her teens, dropped out of high school in the middle of her junior year. Her father was upset, and she promised him that she would go back to finish school even as her career started to take off. But, several years later he died unexpectedly before she had the chance to keep her promise. Over the next three decades, she tried several times to earn her high school equivalency diploma, but fell short each time.

Marchette came to Literacy Partners motivated not only to keep her promise to her father, but also to earn the credential she needed to enroll in a bachelor's degree program and begin a new career in artist management. Her teachers gave her encouragement, intensive coaching in mathematics and critical thinking, and support until the day she took the exam.

"I cried like a newborn baby!" she says. "I had passed!" More tears of joy came for Marchette when a long-time Literacy Partners supporter and former board member, Jackie Weld Drake, surprised her (and all the graduates at a ceremony in November 2016) with a \$1,000 college scholarship.

At the graduation ceremony, guest speaker New York City Councilmember Carlos Menchaca, a leading voice for adult literacy, spoke of Marchette and her fellow graduates as "a tremendous inspiration. All of them worked tirelessly, and overcame significant educational barriers to reach this day."

Marchette is now enrolled in college and working with her husband to open their artist management business.

Photo: Literacy Partners



A triumphant Marchette Hellams sings "The Winner in You" at the Literacy Partners graduation ceremony.



In a captivating speech, New York City Councilmember Carlos Menchaca lauded the graduates for overcoming significant hurdles.

RODMAN L. DRAKE SCHOLARSHIP

"We live in a city where one in five New Yorkers is functionally illiterate—who cannot read a bedtime story to a child or fill out a job application. Offering the gift of reading to an adult who heretofore couldn't read a subway map or write a letter, and especially to one who is ready to go to college, in honor of my late husband, Rodman L. Drake, gives me great pleasure."

— JACKIE WELD DRAKE



**BOOKS OF
THEIR OWN**

**THANK YOU,
HARPERCOLLINS!**

What do *Runaway Bunny*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *The Giving Tree* have in common? Sure, these beloved classic children's books have ushered millions of children into blissful sleep for more than two generations.

But, they're also among the 600 books that HarperCollins contributed to Literacy Partners families in 2016. The publisher made the donation through our Books of Their Own program, in which we provide a library of at least 10 age- and culturally appropriate books to each of our adult students' children. Providing our low-income immigrant students with their own collections of children's books is one of the most important ways in which Literacy Partners helps families adopt the habit of daily reading—developing children's love of books and ensuring that they're well prepared when they begin school.



Donating books to charitable organizations is a long tradition for the publisher. "HarperCollins has been entertaining, educating, and inspiring generations of readers for two centuries, and is committed to ensuring that future generations have access to books," says Erin Crum, vice president of corporate communications. "We recognize the important role reading plays in a child's life and are happy to be able to provide support for Literacy Partners' Books of Their Own program."

Says Anthony Tassi, Literacy Partners executive director, "HarperCollins appreciates the power of books to transform the educational prospects of low-income New York City children, and we're so glad this company is now an integral part of Books of Their Own." ■

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**“THEIR STORIES GRAB
YOUR HEART”**

—LESLEY STAHL
LITERACY PARTNERS SUPPORTER