

LEARN

LITERACY
PARTNERS

SPRING 2018

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READING CHANGES EVERYTHING



Dear Friends,

What a start to the spring we've had!

In February, we celebrated 12 students who recently earned High School Equivalency diplomas. Unlike traditional high school students, adults who earn their degrees usually have no pomp, no circumstance, and no ceremony. But that's where we come in: we rent an auditorium to hold a proper graduation ceremony, complete with certificates, caps, gowns, speeches, and yes, the famous graduation song (which never fails to bring a tear to my eye). Our graduates often bring their kids, who beam with pride as they see a room full of people clap for their parent.

In March, we held our annual Gala. What a night! Hosted by Cynthia McFadden and with the support of hundreds of guests and contributors, we raised close to \$1 million for our work to empower immigrant and low-income New Yorkers through literacy education.

We honored Univision President and CEO Randy Falco and publisher/literary agent extraordinaire Joni Evans. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz read a profound and timely passage from his new children's book *Islandborn*. Sarah Paulson joined us to read from *The Goldfinch*, and her partner, Holland Taylor, made a special appearance to honor her longtime friend and our champion, Liz Smith. The event culminated with an inspiring personal story from one of our students, Moravet Espinoza (see page 4).

But the night was bittersweet, as it was the first Gala without our longtime organizers, hosts, and patron saints Liz Smith, Parker Ladd, and Arnold Scaasi. They were living testaments to the power of friends working together to make the world a better place in a simple, concrete, but everlasting way. A new generation of notable New Yorkers is stepping into their place to carry forward the Evening of Readings and Gala Dinner Dance in their memory.

Our graduates, our students, and their families are able to overcome obstacles and achieve great things because of **you** – our supporters – who see their potential and help them achieve it. Their victories are your victories. On behalf of them, and all of us at Literacy Partners, **thank you**.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anthony Tassi".

Anthony Tassi, CEO

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



"I always knew I had it in me – I just needed someone else to see it in me, too." –DARIN RICKS



"For some the hardest thing to do is start, but if you don't stop, you will complete your journey." –JENNIFER FRANCIS

Our Students Graduate!

In February we held a graduation ceremony for 12 of our students who earned their High School Equivalency degrees over the past year. A high-school degree is associated with significantly higher earnings and is a prerequisite to go to college or enter many job-training programs. Through the generosity of Jackie Weld Drake, we were able to award each graduate a \$1,000 Rodman L. Drake Memorial Scholarship to help further their educations.

With the support of individuals like you, Literacy Partners is proud to have seen Darin's potential and to have been a part of Jennifer's journey. We look forward to seeing what they accomplish next. ■

Photos: Jonica Moore





MORAVET ESPINOZA

Overcoming the Odds for the Love of her Children

Moravet Espinoza is currently enrolled in our English for Parents class in Queens. Moravet's inspiring story prompted us to ask her to be the student speaker at our Gala this year. Below is what she shared.

Hello, my name is Moravet. I am from Mexico City. My husband and I came to New York in 2000 to give our children a good future. I am learning English at Literacy Partners with my teacher, Sandra. My class is good for my English and so much more. It helped me with my family in a very special way.

Last semester we had a project called Moments of Connection – a time when we, as parents, connect with each child beyond physical contact to create a strong bond with our children.

I have three children: Atri, Jesus, and Jim. I love my three children. One is an adult, one is a teenager, and one is a child. They are the reason I am standing here tonight.

Every night at dinner, we turn off the tv and cell phones so there are no distractions. We connect by talking about our day, our fears, or goals, and we say why we appreciate each other. This makes my family smile. I never did this with my family when I was growing up. My children are not close in age but this special moment helps us connect and understand that we should always find time for family.

My son Jesus was born with a terrible condition called DiGeorge Syndrome. One week after he was born, he went for his first open-heart surgery. The doctors told me that he will need treatment for the rest of his life.

I decided to make his life as meaningful as the ones my other two children have. I decided the fear of losing him will not stop me from loving him. I want every moment to be a “moment of connection.”

My teacher, Sandra, showed us how reading a book can be a moment of connection with children. My parents never read to me when I was a child, but I decided I was going to try it with Jesus.

A few days ago, I read him *The Family Book* by Todd Parr, and this is what happened: First, I practiced pronunciation with Jim. He is always there to help me. He knows I am trying very hard to learn English. Then I read the book to Jesus.

He laughed at me – maybe because he has never heard me speaking English or maybe because I don't pronounce words well? I remember Sandra says to have a conversation with your child. She says to ask questions to see if he is understanding. I asked Jesus: What color is this? How many fish do you see? I am very happy of the progress we are making in reading and understanding a story.

I want to thank the people who support Literacy Partners. Thank you for supporting reading and for helping parents become better role models for their children. I am very happy to be in such a different English class, where we feel like very important people.

When I was a child, I did not have a voice. Now I am a mother and I want my children to have a voice.” ■

“When I was a child, I did not have a voice. Now I am a mother and I want my children to have a voice.”



GALA NIGHT: March 14, 2018



On March 14, Literacy Partners held our 32nd annual Evening of Readings and Gala Dinner Dance, honoring Randy Falco, president and CEO of Univision, and Joni Evans, giant of the publishing industry. We were treated to a reading by Junot Díaz from his new book, *Islandborn*. And, Sarah Paulson joined us to read from *The Goldfinch* (the adaptation of which she is currently filming). The evening was also a celebration of the legacy created by our trio of champions, Liz Smith, Parker Ladd, and Arnold Scaasi. Holland Taylor, Sarah's partner and legend of screen and stage, paid homage to Liz Smith. Together we raised close to \$1 million through the support of so many to continue to empower New Yorkers and their families through literacy education. Thank you! ■

“Excuse me for bragging...but that was a helluva lot of fun.” —LIZ SMITH

Photos: BFA



LIFETIME OF TEACHING LIVES ON: Rhoda Amron

We at Literacy Partners were never fortunate enough to meet Rhoda Amron in her lifetime, but we thank her for the legacy she has created at Literacy Partners through the generosity of her friends and family after her passing.

Rhoda spent her entire career (and beyond) as a driven and creative teacher, completely committed to her students and their families. For 30 years, she taught at P.S. 201 in Queens, initially with fifth graders. However, she saw her students were unprepared – primarily lacking the reading skills necessary to be successful. So she addressed the problem directly. She moved to teach lower grades with the hope of starting kids with a stronger foundation in reading and writing.



She used her teaching skills at home, too, with her three children, eight grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. She read to them and encouraged their own reading and creative writing. She showed them how reading and writing connected them to the greater world.

Even after she and her husband, Richard, retired, she taught other retirees in biweekly classes on literary analysis of short stories.

Rhoda passed away suddenly in December 2017 at the age of 91. Mourning Rhoda, and eager to celebrate her life, her family sought a way to honor her legacy as a teacher. They found Literacy Partners, and because our work embodied Rhoda's ethos, they urged loved ones to make donations in Rhoda's memory. Dozens did.

It made sense to choose Literacy Partners. Rhoda always emphasized to parents the vital importance of reading with their children every day, knowing that was the best way to prepare them for school. It is not surprising that our mission so resonated with Rhoda's community; these are central themes of our work.

We are so grateful that Rhoda's friends and family gave generously in her memory to Literacy Partners so that we could continue to empower families to read and learn together, and so that Rhoda might live on through our work. ■

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.

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**—DARIN RICKS
LITERACY PARTNERS STUDENT**