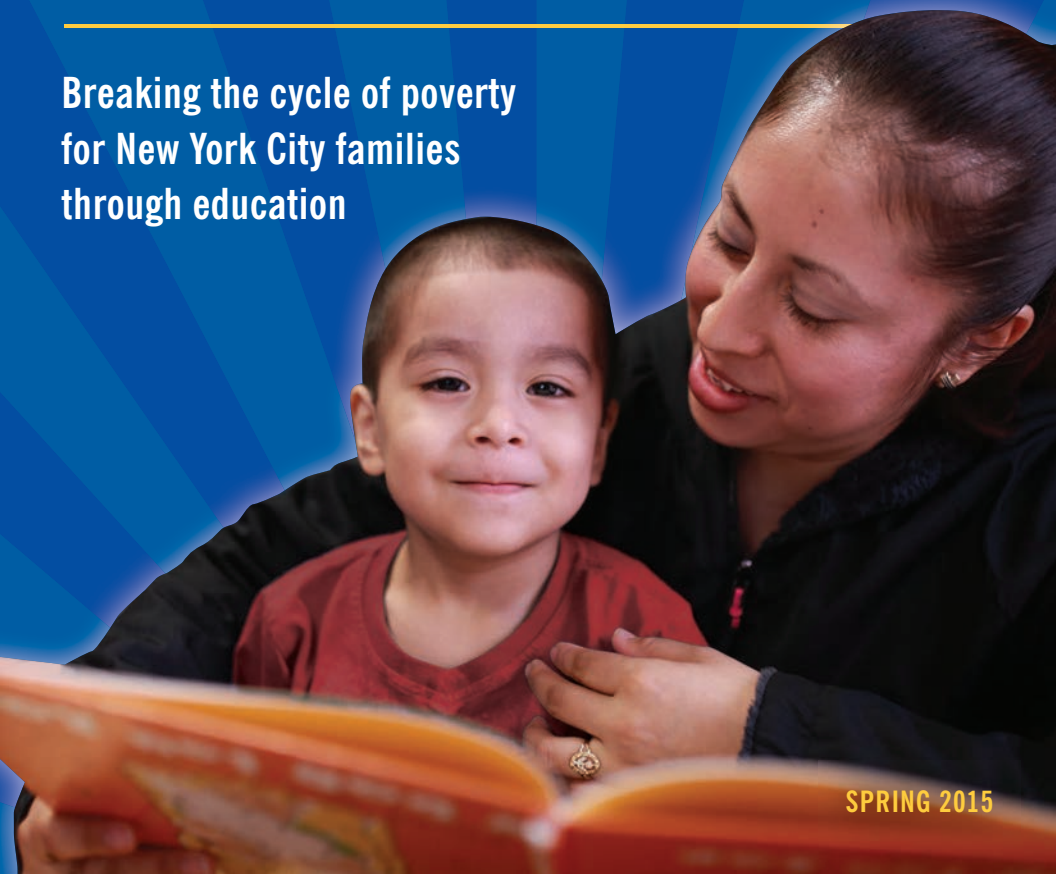


Update from Literacy Partners

READING CHANGES EVERYTHING

Breaking the cycle of poverty
for New York City families
through education



SPRING 2015

Literacy Partners has some of the strongest students around and Christina Gadsden is one of them. Christina has always loved books. She says, “Books placed me in a different environment, and helped me see things from other people’s eyes.” She credits her foster mother with teaching her to read and instilling a belief in the power of words. “She was old school. She always said, ‘If you can’t read, you can’t do anything.’”

Books and her own journal were an escape; but school wasn’t always a supportive environment for Christina. Growing up in the foster care system, she was moved from home to home and school to school, and encountered numerous personal and academic obstacles. Difficult family situations coupled with uncaring teachers became barriers to her academic success.

Frustrated and dejected, Christina dropped out of school in 10th grade and found herself homeless and without a high school diploma. “I had no vision for my future. I thought I’d always be homeless with nothing.” In 2013, while living in a shelter, Christina found Literacy Partners and began to rewrite her story.

Christina embodies the tenacity and spirit of the typical successful student at any level of education; but there is nothing typical about her. She overcame many obstacles on the path to graduation, and successfully earned her High School Equivalency diploma in January 2015. At graduation, her teacher Timothy Ruffin, compared her to a boxer: “They say that the heart of a boxer is shown not by how many times he gets knocked down, but by the number of times he gets up. Christina has had many knockdowns in her life, and each time she gets up.”

Christina credits the support, encouragement and attention of her Literacy Partners teachers with getting her through tough times and giving her the tools and confidence to pass the difficult TASC (GED) exam. “I never had teachers like the ones at Literacy Partners,” she says.

Armed with her diploma, Christina sees her future “a whole lot different,” she says with a laugh. Her hope for the future is infectious and inspires all who come in contact with her. Christina is enrolled in the CUNY College Prep Program, and wants to become a social worker and give back to the community — something she envisioned for herself when was young. “That’s always been my goal. I figured I could help another child avoid going through what I did.” Christina is often reflective about her experience. “I want to go back and work in the system, because I am the system,” she says. “I know I can make a change because I have been a part of it.” •



“I DID IT!”

Christina Gadsen, 2015 Graduate

Imagine having only a fifth-grade education. Imagine trying to navigate public transportation, your children's school or open a bank account if you can't understand the little you can read. Imagine you didn't even know the alphabet or how to write your name. The frustration and demoralization bubble over.

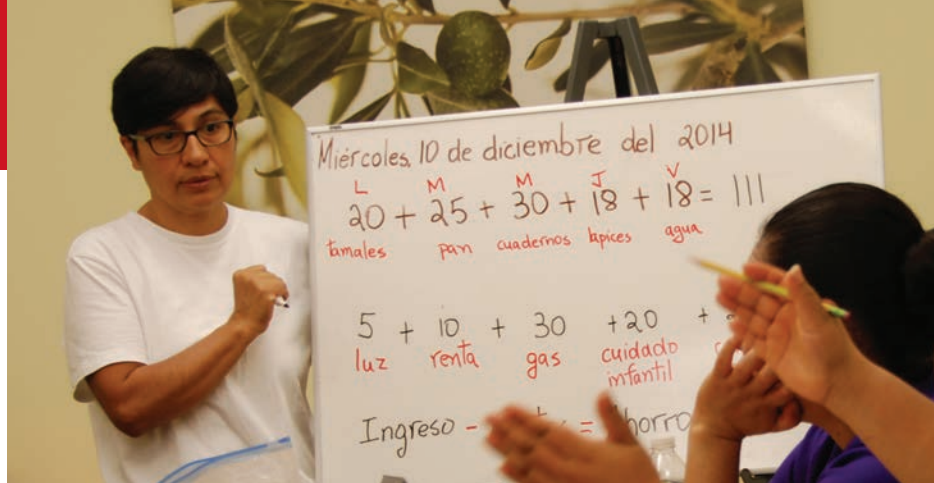
Now imagine moving to a foreign country – perhaps not even by choice – where no one speaks your native language. Everything is unfamiliar. Words. Sounds. Signs. How would you feel?

Now add in the trauma of domestic violence. This is what the students in Flor de Maria Eilet's class at Literacy Partners (LP) are confronting on a daily basis. Flor de Maria, a licensed social worker, teaches a basic literacy class, in partnership with the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence, for women from Mexico who are trapped, or have recently escaped, physically violent and emotionally abusive home situations. "You just can't imagine their level of disorientation when the class began meeting," Flor de Maria remembers. "My students are not native Spanish speakers. They are the indigenous people of Mexico, speaking Mixtec and Nahuatl while living in the South Bronx in very difficult circumstances."

The students in Flor de Maria's class come from communities where women have limited power and their right to education is often withheld. The reality of being an immigrant in New York with very limited literacy and no English skills is not much better. But, every woman in the class has a story of survival and a dream of a better life for her children.

The seven students in the class are among the strongest women and mothers one could imagine—even if they don't know it yet. They spend nine hours a week in an intensive Spanish literacy class learning the skills necessary to live full and independent lives. The decision to learn Spanish before English came from the students themselves. They feel more closely connected to their communities in the South Bronx being able to communicate in Spanish. Once they have a solid literacy foundation in Spanish, they can take an English class.

The women are excelling in their education and, moreover, becoming more self-assured and confident. A student who, at one time, couldn't write her own name is now taking advantage of resources like the library, free museums and signed up her children for after-school and summer programs. She



Flor de Maria's Spanish literacy class

understands her children's homework better, feels more confident talking with teachers and school administrators and asking for information.

The camaraderie among students is striking. After being quarantined in a foreign land by an abusive relationship, they have used their LP class to create a supportive community together. They are responsible for one another. They feel safe—and that's Flor de Maria's master plan.

She has created a safe and nurturing environment that is educational and social; comfort levels grow and the learning really begins. "People learn only when emotions are involved," Flor de Maria says. "If emotions are positive, learning is positive. It is a slow process, but we are very intentional and it seems to be working well."

The classroom becomes a sanctuary and the possibilities emerge. Still, it's a delicate balance between learning and making room for expressions of hurt and anger. Flor de Maria accomplishes this while keeping focused on the positive. Each lesson is designed with both practical and emotional components. So, in learning the nuts and bolts of how to draft a letter, students practice their new writing skills with letters to loved ones expressing their feelings.

The learning extends beyond reading and writing. Students are better able to organize their busy lives. Before Flor de Maria's class, students often missed appointments because they were unable to understand the documents provided. Now, they can better manage important meetings with social workers and city agencies that provide critical resources for their families.

Every parent wishes the world for their children. With better literacy skills and a growing sense of empowerment, Flor de Maria's students are able to provide so much more than they thought possible just a few short months ago. •

Spotlight on our Friends

You never know where the next great idea will come from. A little creativity can create a huge impact from people's desire to give back.

In April, HarperCollins held a week-long online employee giving campaign. The generous enthusiasm of their staff yielded more than \$6,000 for Literacy Partners. Like a great fairytale, HarperCollins spun those gifts into more than \$20,000 by matching all donations three to one. A true storybook ending! •



The perfect recipe relies on just the right ingredients. In 2014, Penguin Random House mixed up something perfect to nourish our programs: a community cookbook called "Random Tastes." The diverse contributors from the staff of the publishing giant share recipes and personal stories that make for a great cookbook while truly helping sustain Literacy Partners; \$15,000 in proceeds from its sales were donated. Now that's tasty! •

Penguin
Random
House

We thank you for your continued support!



Evening of Readings Gala

2015

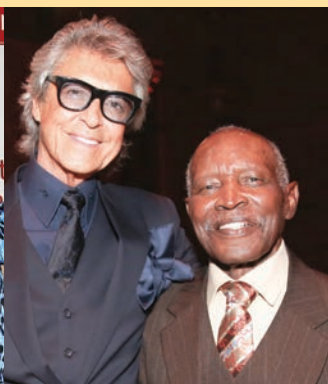
Literacy Partners held another successful Evening of Readings Gala on April 14, 2015 which raised more than \$1 million. The gala is critical to our ability to maintain our free classes that help strengthen families through the power of education. We are so appreciative of our Board of Directors and all our generous donors for making the event a smashing success. We would like to give special thanks to Robert Thomson, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Tom Brokaw, Ali Wentworth and Literacy Partners student Matthew Brown, who is a shining example of our important work.



Robert Thomson and
Barbara Taylor Bradford



Tom Brokaw and
Ali Wentworth



Tommy Tune and
Matthew Brown

OUR MISSION

We strengthen families by empowering parents through education. With our free classes, low-income parents gain the skills to create a better life for themselves while transferring important literacy skills to their children. Together, we can close the achievement gap before children even begin school.

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