



LITERACY
PARTNERS

THE FIRST 50 YEARS



LETTER FROM THE CEO

Dear Friends,

As I look back on the history of Literacy Partners, I am moved (often to tears) by the stories of resilience and triumph among so many of our students . . . and equally so by the enduring spirit of hope and progress that has defined our community.

Back in 1973, we took our first steps as Literacy Volunteers of New York City with a bold vision that understood literacy as both a meaningful personal skill and a fundamental civil right. We set out to share the gift of reading with adults who had never experienced it and, at the same time, to right one of the most important historical wrongs plaguing our society. Pretty ambitious stuff for a young executive director and two Vista volunteers with donated space in the offices of the American Red Cross.

Over the years, hundreds and eventually thousands of people answered the call and joined the mission as volunteers, staff members, board members, and donors. We brought passion and energy and gave generously of ourselves as the organization matured and became one of the most influential and innovative adult literacy programs in the country. It was a thrill, as our patron saint Liz Smith said, knowing that we could make such an important difference in the lives of our fellow New Yorkers and leave the world a little better than we found it.

Today, Literacy Partners reaches parents in communities across the country and stands as a testament to our collective determination to build a more inclusive and equitable society. As we recount this journey, let us celebrate the many literacy workers, advocates, and champions, their deep respect for adult learners, and the spirit of friendship that built and sustained our mission.

After fifty years, we know that change is inevitable. We also know that Literacy Partners will be there to meet the moment and continue to create the conditions for parents to transform their own lives and ensure a brighter future for their children through the power of literacy.

Thank you,



Anthony Tassi



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ORIGIN STORY

**THERE WERE LAWS PREVENTING
BLACK PEOPLE FROM LEARNING
TO READ. IT WAS BECAUSE THE
WHITE PEOPLE ENSLAVING
BLACK AMERICANS KNEW THAT
LITERACY LED TO LIBERATION.**

**— Nikole Hannah-Jones,
honored at the Literacy Partners gala in 2020**

Adult literacy was a foundation of the emancipation movement. One hundred years later, the Civil Rights Movement expanded basic rights for all Americans. Massive progress was made, but resistance was fierce. The work of establishing an equitable education system was far from finished. The federal government responded with important new programs, including adult literacy.

Literacy Partners was founded in this tradition. Established with a federal “Right to Read” grant, we enrolled our first student in early 1974. Since then, we have served more than 49,000 students—creating the conditions for low-income and immigrant adults to transform their lives and create a brighter future for their children through the power of literacy.

Our students got better jobs, got more involved in their children’s education, and were able to access better health care. Some went back to finish up their high school education and even went on to college. Others stopped pretending that they left their glasses at home. They read their own mail and wrote letters that really mattered. They achieved lifelong dreams.

1970s

“

Just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.”

– Toni Morrison

TONI MORRISON

The queen of American letters read at the Literacy Volunteers of New York City gala in 1988. A year after her passing in 2019, Literacy Partners was granted exclusive rights to present marathon readings of her classic works *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*, with an all-star cast of famous writers each reading a chapter.

Photo by Deborah Feingold/Corbis via Getty Images

IT WAS AN IMPROBABLE BEGINNING.

When Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) applied for a federal “Right to Read” grant in 1970 to expand their program from Syracuse, NY, to Massachusetts and Connecticut, they never intended to serve New York City. But federal officials insisted.

LVA failed in their first two attempts to establish a program in the city. But, in 1973, they finally succeeded when Dianne Kangisser was hired and dispatched to begin Literacy Volunteers of New York City (LVNYC). She had no office, virtually no budget, and a staff of only two VISTA volunteers fresh out of college.

Dianne’s sister worked at the New York Blood Center, where she found two empty desks that her boss agreed to lend out. Thus, the American Red Cross building on Manhattan’s Upper West Side became LVNYC’s headquarters. Two desks for a team of three.

Dianne began recruiting tutors and partners for space, while Karen Griswold revamped the LVA tutoring approach to better address the concerns of

urban adults and supervised the first tutoring sessions. LVNYC became an independent entity in 1975 with several small government grants. The staff grew to include three paid employees and ten VISTA volunteers by 1980.

At the very dawn of the concept of corporate social responsibility, Rita Lambek of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies advised Dianne on a novel approach that would become a mainstay of LVNYC’s model: corporate partnerships for volunteers and tutoring space. Rita later served on the board of directors for more than a decade.



New York Life was the first corporate partner. Forty-five employees tutored students twice a week in the corporate cafeteria. The company provided pound cake and hot chocolate. The partnership benefited more than 3,000 students over thirty-seven years until building renovations forced the program to move. Citibank, Time, Inc., McGraw Hill, and other blue chip companies would follow.

“

I really learned how to read little by little. The first time it was very difficult. Now it's great, you know. It really changed me – look, I feel like a different person.”

– Mr. Garcia

1976

The very first newsletter, mimeographed and distributed to volunteer tutors. The program relied on dozens of idealistic volunteers who were not daunted by how challenging it would be to teach adults to read.

1975



LVNYC held its first celebration of student reading at St. Peter's Church at the CitiCorp Center, where another ten celebrations would be held, along with some of the first fundraisers in the 1980s.

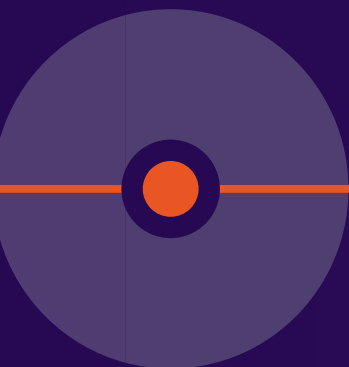


1976

LVNYC established tutoring programs at the Brooklyn Public Library, which quickly spread to branches throughout the city. When the libraries won new funding to expand and manage the programs themselves in 1984, LVNYC provided training and technical assistance.



1980s



“

We must create a climate where people agree that human beings are more alike than unlike. The only way to do that is through education.”

— Maya Angelou



MAYA ANGELOU

Maya Angelou thrilled audiences with her dramatic reading at the second Literacy Volunteers of NYC gala in 1987.

Photo by Susan Mullally Weil/Boston College Photo Prints/
John J. Burns Library/Boston College

AFTER FIVE YEARS, THE FEDERAL MONEY BEGAN TO DRY UP.

Having started on a shoestring budget, LVNYC steadily increased its funding until cutbacks in Washington precipitated the first of a number of periodic financial crises. LVNYC responded by organizing its first public fundraiser – at \$25 a ticket – in 1982 and began appealing to local corporations and foundations in a more systematic (and urgent) way.

WNBC-TV reporter Carol Jenkins produced a multi-part investigation of adult illiteracy, including a profile of LVNYC. She joined the board of directors and introduced LVNYC to Liz Smith, who, along with her dear friends publishing executive Parker Ladd and fashion designer Arnold Scaasi, would profoundly transform the organization's public standing and financial foundation for years to come.

Carol also recruited her WNBC colleague Rolanda Watts to the cause, and the organization enjoyed growing recognition in the press, often featuring student leaders who told their personal stories and served as eloquent spokespeople for the cause.

The 1980s were also a time of tremendous program innovation. Under new executive director Eli Zal and Education Director Marilyn Boutwell, the organization began teaching writing alongside reading and

created new opportunities for students to publish their work. Board president Nancy McCord of Warner Books joined the staff to create a publishing imprint to excerpt and adapt popular books for newly literate adults and publish original student works. The student books were a huge success, but the enterprise was a financial challenge until being sold to New Readers Press.

The number of students served grew dramatically throughout the 1980s. Tutoring sessions took place largely in donated corporate space, typically the employee cafeterias of companies like New York Life, Colgate, McGraw Hill, and Paramount that sat unused in the evenings. After a few years, the original one-on-one tutoring model was gradually replaced with small group instruction to maximize student interaction and cooperative learning, usually with

two tutors. The move was not without controversy, but was generally supported by students as it moved the program away from the dynamic of one “expert” (usually a white volunteer) and one “novice” (usually a person of color) and dovetailed with other student leadership efforts. Groups pursued topics of interest to individual students, including math, driver's education, and Bible study. Student leaders and volunteers organized student-run “clinics” to help with banking, filling out tax forms, etc. In the late 1980s, LVNYC created an AIDS education and prevention program in partnership with the NYC Department of Health.



- A sharecropper's son who could not read or write until he was thirty-eight, Calvin Miles was a driving force behind student leadership both as a student and a staff member. Calvin made frequent media and public appearances, published several books of his own writing, and advocated for adult learners for many years.

- WNBC-TV journalist Carol Jenkins reports on the hidden crisis of adult literacy and the work of LVNYC, leading to 600 student inquiries in 1979. Carol joined the LVNYC Board in 1981 and introduced the organization to her colleague Liz Smith.

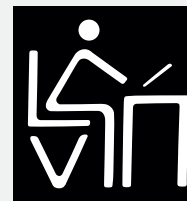
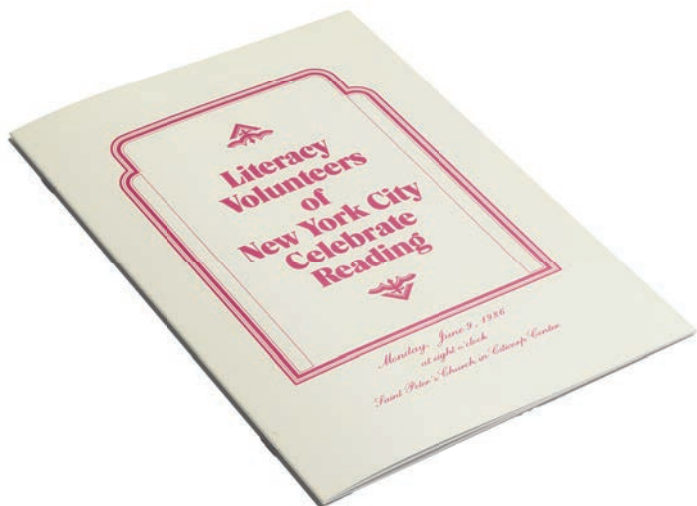
1985

1982



1981

- Before Liz Smith got involved, LVNYC organized its first public fundraiser to respond to a cash crunch when some of its original federal funding ended. Literacy Volunteers raised \$3,000.



**LITERACY
VOLUNTEERS OF
NEW YORK CITY**
666 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, NY 10012

**Literacy
Volunteers Logo**
c. 1980s

After seeing what a small amount of money LVNYC could raise on its own, Liz Smith organized a benefit in 1983 (Broadway Salutes Liz Smith) that raised \$130,000, almost equivalent to the entire annual budget. After two more fundraisers, Liz teamed up with Parker Ladd to organize the first literacy gala with prominent authors in 1986. Several years later, Arnold Scaasi became involved and the event grew into a New York social institution.

1986

1987

Astley Arnold at the annual celebration of student writing after reading an essay he wrote entitled "It Feels So Good When You Do Something That Is Good."

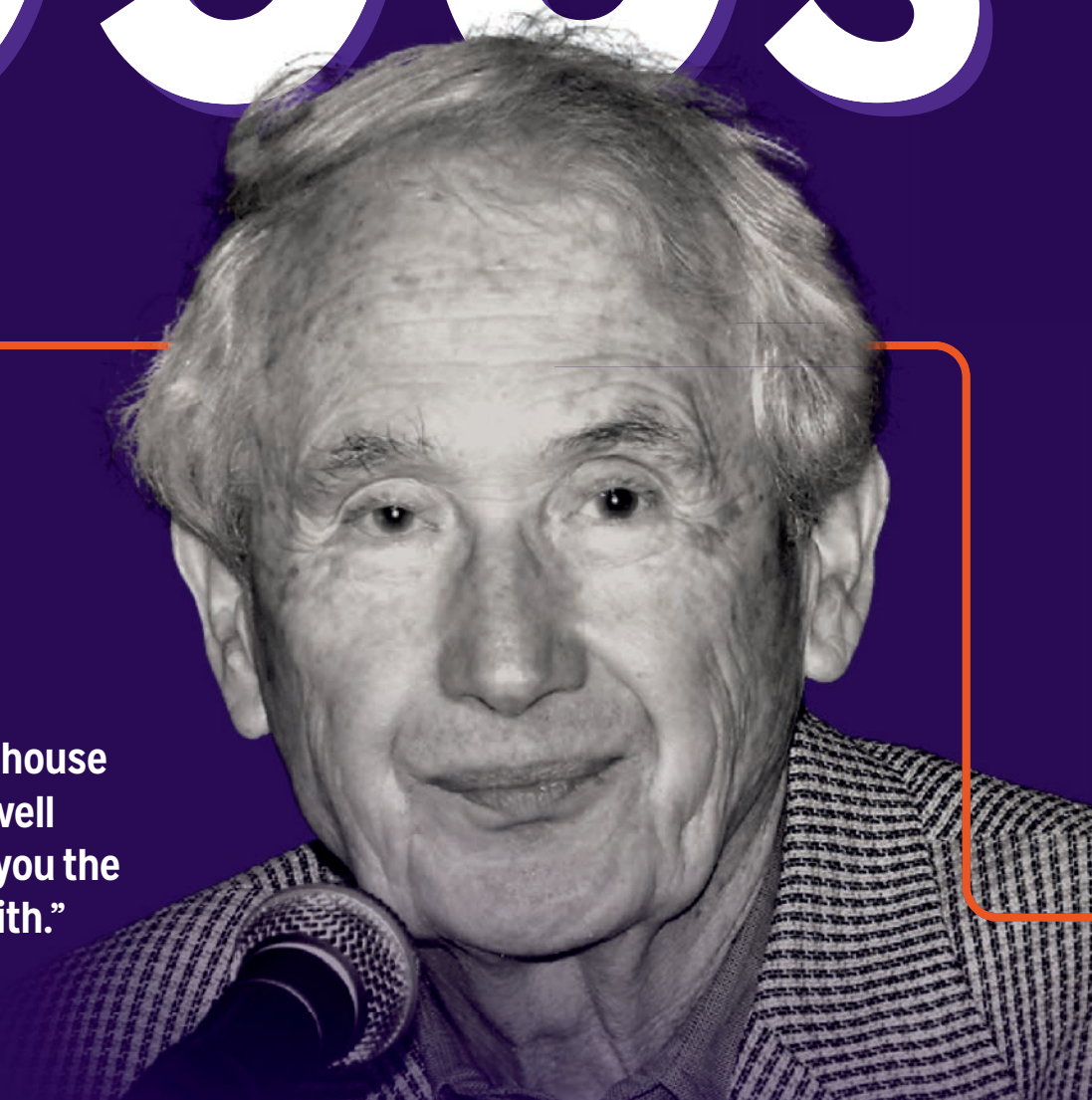


1990s

“

Your mind is a treasure house
that you should stock well
and it's the one part of you the
world can't interfere with.”

— Frank McCourt



FRANK McCOURT

Former NYC school teacher Frank McCourt read from his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Angela's Ashes* at the 1998 gala. The following year, the film adaptation premiered at the Beekman theater. Paramount Pictures donated proceeds from the screening.

Photo by Elke Wetzig (Elya)/Wikipedia

A TIME OF MAJOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND VISIBILITY.

In 1993, LVNYC won a five-year contract to implement the Begin Education Gain Independence Now (BEGIN) program as part of the City's welfare education program. Under Executive Director Liliam Barrios-Paoli, fourteen new classes were created for approximately 600 adults, mostly mothers of young children, focusing on reading, writing, and math. Computers for the first computer classes were provided through grants from the Clark and Booth Ferris Foundations.

At the same time, LVNYC grew its work of tutoring young mothers into a more formal "family literacy" program in partnership with Head Start programs, settlement houses, and several public schools. The organization was funded to lead a network of similar programs across the City.

In 1994, LVNYC began hosting the annual Literacy Luncheon at Gracie Mansion as part of the City's Literacy Week. In subsequent years, LVNYC organized conferences for tutors and students, hosted a public literacy fair in Union Square, and led many efforts to build the field of adult literacy.

The agency adopted a long-range plan to become a new kind of organization with a bigger impact on the education system. The organization would continue volunteer adult literacy tutoring and teacher-led family literacy and BEGIN

classes, but would focus new resources on technical assistance, training, and advocacy both locally and nationally.

The Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund provided funds to work with a dozen programs across the country over three years to define "what works" in adult literacy and use these best practices to influence national policy and practice. LVNYC published technical assistance guides and helped other groups replicate the model.

In 1995, in recognition of its expanded mission and national ambitions, LVNYC changed its name to Literacy Partners and ended its twenty-two-year affiliation with Literacy Volunteers of America. Jon Deveaux, a member of the National Literacy Council, was recruited to lead the revamped organization to achieve its new mission.



LVNYC established a computer lab where students could master the emerging digital literacy skills that were becoming more important throughout society (or as we said back in the day: “learn computers”).



BEGIN students typically had higher literacy levels than other LVNYC students and focused on more academic content. Many graduated to high school equivalency programs to continue their education.



It’s hard to read if you can’t see the words on the page. Dr. Andrea Thau provided vision screening to Literacy Partners students and found that 70 percent had untreated vision problems. Most just needed glasses; some required more intervention. The program would evolve into a comprehensive health referral program and a curriculum to teach health literacy skills.



1991

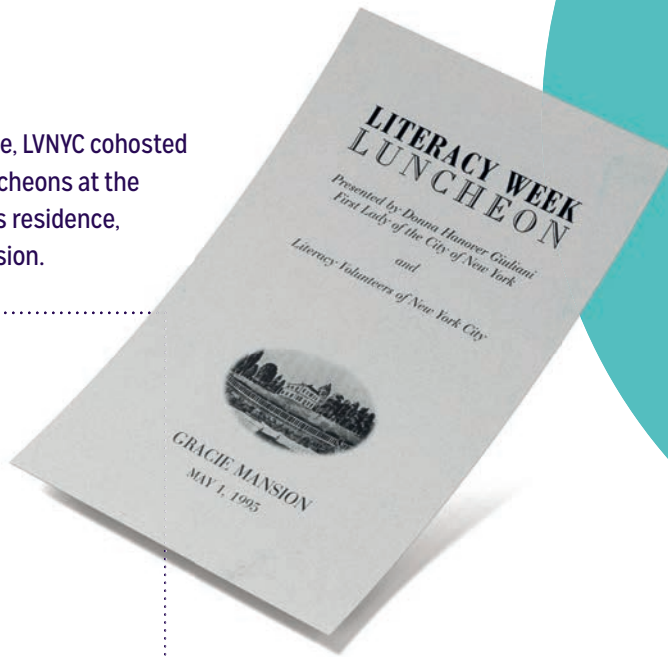
1993

1994



Students had an opportunity to publish their original work in anthologies of student writing. In the mid-1990s, LVNYC published *The Big Apple Journal* several times a year. Individual tutoring centers published their own collections as well.

For a decade, LVNYC cohosted literacy luncheons at the NYC mayor's residence, Gracie Mansion.



“

This is the only time all week I feel safe. Everyone knows my secret, and I know theirs. I can really relax here.”

— Richard

1995

The organization changed its name to Literacy Partners in late 1995 to better reflect its expanded mission and the collaborative nature of its work.

**Literacy
Partners, Inc.**

In response to the changing demographics of the City and resulting shifts in public policy priorities, Literacy Partners expanded English classes for immigrant adults and refugees. These students from every corner of the world would eventually become the majority of the enrollment.

1997



2000s



“

Reading is everything. Reading makes me feel like I've accomplished something, learned something, become a better person. Reading is escape, and the opposite of escape; it's a way to make contact with reality ... and it's a way of making contact with someone else's imagination after a day that's all too real.”

— Nora Ephron

NORA EPHRON

Prolific journalist, writer, and filmmaker Nora Ephron read at the 2006 gala, twenty years after she appeared at the first Celebration of Reading in 1986.

Photo by Brigitte Lacombe/Vanity Fair

EXPANDING TO MEET THE NEEDS OF A CHANGING CITY.

At the start of its fourth decade, Literacy Partners offered a comprehensive education program to meet the wide range of needs of a diverse population of adult learners: from the most basic reading and writing to high school equivalency classes, English for new immigrants, and family literacy classes.

The organization also greatly expanded counseling services to help students reduce barriers to participation and learning.

After several years of discussions in the late 1990s, the organization committed to serving a much larger share of immigrants, reflecting a shift in the adult education field to acknowledge that learning English was fundamental to “literacy” in the United States in the twenty-first century. New York City and State both shifted the majority of public funding into English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Literacy Partners student demographics would come to reflect that shift as well.

Literacy Partners also faced significant headwinds during this time. A new era of educational metrics and accountability arrived and, with it, a shift in public policy and foundation funding priorities toward quick wins and measurable gains on standardized testing. As a result, the agency discontinued the BEGIN program when the City shifted

its focus away from comprehensive education to emphasize short-term job placements.

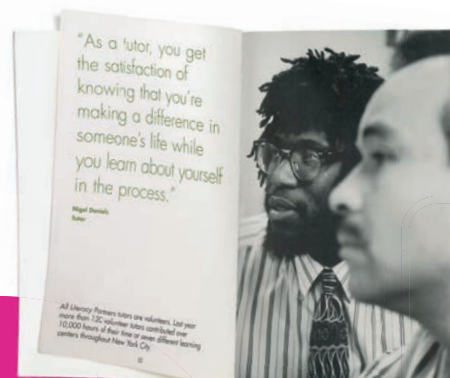
Literacy Partners was a highly innovative and successful pioneer in a field whose incentives were now shifting away from its core strengths: serving adults at the very lowest skill levels who typically had experienced significant trauma. The new focus on short-term, one-size-fits-all results was not helpful for people with dyslexia and/or other profound learning challenges. Some people’s needs would not be resolved in even a hundred hours of instruction and their legitimate and meaningful progress would not be reflected in the narrow constructs of standardized testing.

Liz Smith and the board of directors met the moment by continuing to expand the gala’s presence, initiating annual fundraising appeals to individual donors, and by launching a \$5 million campaign to establish the Liz Smith Fund that would provide reserves for the organization into the future.

“

I started coming here in April because my mother and my daughter had been coming here for three years. My mother inspires me. I always wanted to learn to read. I'm picking up a book now. I'm reading the Bible. When you've been trapped, and then you get untrapped, you want to try everything.”

— Louise Ellison



“As a tutor, you get the satisfaction of knowing that you're making a difference in someone's life, while you learn about yourself in the process.”

— Nigel Daniels

Liz Smith, Parker Ladd, and Arnold Scaasi continued to connect celebrities and power brokers, including NYC mayor Mike Bloomberg, to the cause of adult literacy.

2000



2002



Student leader Emma Davis came to Literacy Partners with a third-grade reading level in 2003, and by the time she appeared on the *Today Show* in 2006 she had already earned her GED. After hearing a PSA on 1010 WINS radio, she called Literacy Partners only to find there was a waiting list. She called back many times until she was admitted to the program. “I used to pretend to read the *New York Times* so that I would look smart. For

years I thought I was the only one bluffing my way through life.” Emma served as a spokesperson, tutored other students, and was eventually hired on staff as a student success manager and assistant center director.



2005

Literacy Partners raised nearly \$500,000 over three years from the Alphabet Project. Corporations or individuals could each “sponsor” a letter of the alphabet for \$10,000 a year. A full-page ad ran in the *New York Times*.



2006



2007



By the late 2000s, the family literacy program served mostly immigrants from dozens of countries around the world who enrolled to learn English and help their child's education.



2010s

“

The mission of Literacy Partners is so dear to a mission that I was reared in, a tradition where we understand that writing literature and learning to read is essentially tied to our liberation.”

“I’m a proponent of any organization that pushes forth reading and writing as a tool of emancipation, of liberation.”

– Ta-Nehisi Coates

TA-NEHISI COATES

Ta-Nehisi Coates was presented with the Champion of Literacy Award at the Literacy Partners gala. A public intellectual in the tradition of James Baldwin, Coates was recognized for his work in advancing a collective social literacy that we need to make sense of our history, make amends for structural injustices, and understand how we can advance equity going forward.

Photo by Eduardo Montes Bradley

FROM ADVERSITY TO SUCCESS.

A perfect storm of financial challenges arrived as large public funding and several longstanding private grants, which together represented 70 percent of the education services budget and 40 percent of the overall agency budget, came to an end in 2013.

Around the same time, Parker Ladd and Arnold Scaasi retired from the board of directors and stepped back from their role in the gala. Celebrating her ninetieth birthday in 2013, Liz Smith was soon to follow. An extraordinary era was coming to an end and a new generation of advocates and champions would have to rise to the occasion and take up the cause. But, in the short-term, a major restructuring and downsizing was necessary.

Anthony Tassi, Mayor Mike Bloomberg's head of adult education, was hired as executive director to create a "turn-around" plan for the organization. The decision was made to focus Literacy Partners resources on serving parents of young children by better integrating parenting skills, family reading promotion, and health literacy into the curriculum. Existing literacy students who could no longer be served were transferred to a special program at the New York Public Library, where many students and their tutors continued their studies.

The plan worked. While the organization served fewer students in its traditional adult and family literacy programs, the greater intensity and new strategic focus led to better results for most students and measurable gains in their children's school readiness.

Literacy Partners also pursued a new direction in educational media to reach a much larger population. The agency was hired by the City of New York to work with the City University of New York to create a television series to help recent immigrants improve their English comprehension skills while learning more about City services and resources. *We Speak NYC* was seen by hundreds of thousands of immigrants on the City's television station and online. Thousands more benefited from *We Speak NYC* conversation practice groups at agencies across the city organized by the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs.

Matthew Brown came to Literacy Partners at age seventy-three. A loving father and grandfather, he had a dream of writing his life story and publishing it in a book. He studied for a decade, persevering through the Covid-19 pandemic, until he achieved his dream. Matthew read an inspiring essay on his journey overcoming illiteracy at the 2015 gala and brought the house down by singing a rendition of Frank Sinatra's "My Way."



2016

Literacy Partners began providing students with a home library of books for their children and support for the parent to make family reading a part of their daily routine, thereby addressing key factors that drive school readiness and academic success. Parker Ladd established the Scaasi-Ladd Book Fund to underwrite the cost, and Macmillan, Hachette, HarperCollins, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster were founding sponsors of the new program, which would grow to distribute 20,000 books a year by 2024.

2015

With the 2013 reorganization, Literacy Partners focused its mission on the unique needs and strengths of parents to create a "two-generation" impact on literacy. Family literacy had long been a priority, but the pedagogical and curricular approach was updated based on the latest research on how children develop and learn. During their language instruction, teachers emphasized the parent-child interactions and routines that were known to promote healthy development and early learning.

2013

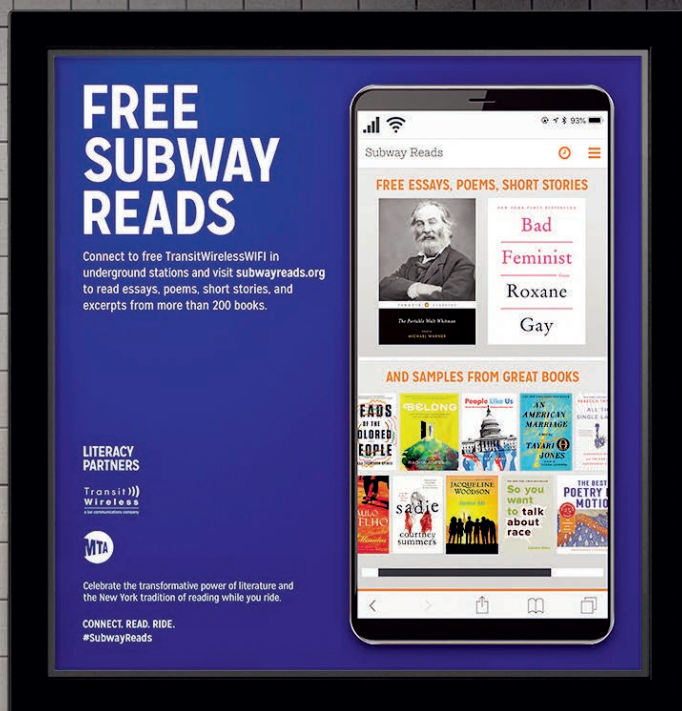


Literacy Partners and CUNY won an Emmy Award for best educational program for the creation of *We Speak NYC*, a nine-episode dramatic comedy series. Written and produced by adult educators and shot in an innovative style to make the English dialogue highly accessible, the show helped hundreds of thousands of immigrants improve their English comprehension skills and learn more about their new home in New York.



2017

2019



When the NYC subway system rolled out free WIFI, Literacy Partners worked with major publishers on a reading promotion campaign with a website where riders could access free excerpts from more than 300 books. The Subway Reads campaign ads ran for three months. The website attracted 187,000 visitors and 591,000 page views during the campaign.

2020s

“

A book does not discriminate against any reader. All are welcome at the table of literature.”

— Julia Alvarez

JULIA ALVAREZ

Julia Alvarez was the first Dominican author to publish in English to widespread critical and popular acclaim in the United States. Her coming-of-age novels and reflections on gender, class, and culture resonated deeply with Literacy Partners students and staff. Alvarez influenced and inspired many important Latina authors of her generation and the next, including Sandra Cisneros, Sonia Manzano, Maria Hinojosa, Esmeralda Santiago, and others who paid tribute to her with a marathon reading of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, produced by Literacy Partners in 2021.

Photo by Todd Balfour/Middlebury College

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TURNED EVERYTHING **UPSIDE DOWN** IN 2020.

After forty-seven years of tutoring and teaching students in person, Literacy Partners reinvented itself in a matter of weeks to become a digital learning program. After lots of tech support and trial and error, a new methodology took shape that proved to be surprisingly effective. A large new influx of volunteers could join Zoom breakout rooms to better engage students of different levels. Classes were recorded and made available for students who were absent. Short, drop-in classes were organized for extra practice. Books were distributed to families in parking lots outside clinics and at Head Start programs. Group text messaging and social media became much more active.

Literacy Partners won national acclaim for its new model. The secret was not trying to adapt the classroom approach to remote learning, but rather being strategic about what worked well on Zoom when parents were at home with their kids. Teachers focused time and resources on the importance of human connections to the learning process – parent-child, parent-teacher, and, especially, peer-to-peer among the students. Classes were often the only social connections students had during the most isolated days of the pandemic lockdown. Literacy Partners also became even more proactive in helping students meet basic needs for food, access to medical care and vaccines, and other children's essentials.

The gala was canceled for two years and replaced by virtual literary readings and book talks involving dozens of important writers. Conceived largely by Literacy Partners board member Jordan

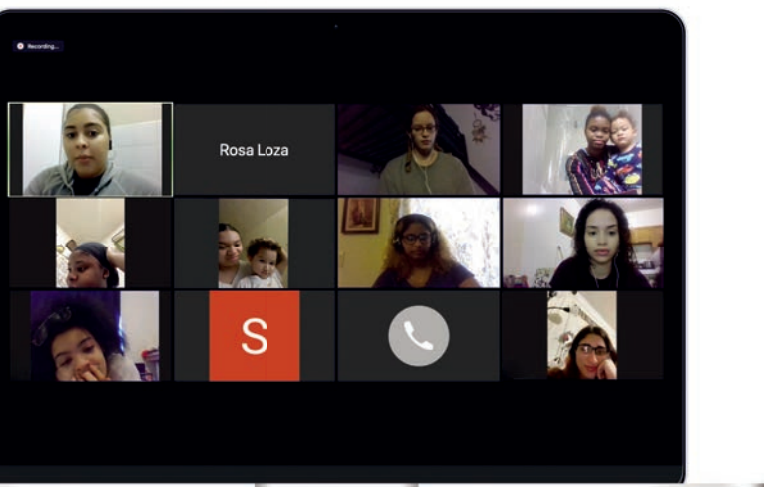
Pavlin (editor in chief at Alfred A. Knopf), the online gatherings proved hugely successful in expanding the Literacy Partners community of followers and network of individual contributors nationwide.

Fifteen years after the organization's name was changed to pursue a vision of national influence and impact, Literacy Partners launched a national program to enhance the capacity of Spanish-speaking parents to promote their children's early learning, social emotional growth, and school readiness – longtime goals of the agency's traditional family literacy program.

Working with Univision and other key partners, Literacy Partners created and produced ten hours of telenovela-style content in Spanish for a mainstream television audience with embedded family literacy messages. The programs earned more than 9 million viewers during their

national broadcasts on Univision. By 2024, Literacy Partners engaged more than 6,000 parents in parent education workshops across the country that were based on the shows and facilitated by other parents who had been through the program and trained by Literacy Partners staff.

In 2020, the Liz Smith Center for Adult and Family Literacy was inaugurated to carry forward the traditional Literacy Partners classes in New York City – reading, writing, and speaking English. The center built on decades of experience with the science of reading and an unwavering commitment to building the strengths and meeting the changing needs of the students.



Through the extraordinary efforts of a group of committed educators and volunteers, Literacy Partners successfully engaged parents online to continue their education during the Covid-19 pandemic. With creative use of Zoom and an increase in the number of volunteers, positive results were maintained and actually increased by some measures.

Volunteers and staff conduct outreach to communities to recruit students and share books with families during the pandemic.



2020-22

2021

Angela Davis, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Edwidge Danticat, Margaret Atwood, Jason Reynolds, and other critically acclaimed authors read chapters from Toni Morrison's classic novels in virtual gatherings at the intersection of social justice and literary power. More than 80,000 people registered for these unique marathon readings, which were viewed more than 125,000 times.

2020

The Bluest Eye:
A Virtual Public Reading
Honoring the Legacy of
Toni Morrison

February 23 & 24 @7pm ET

LITERACY
PARTNERS

A LITERARY &
SOCIAL JUSTICE
SERIES



GET FREE TICKETS



la fuerza de creer

Dulce Sazón

Lunes 25 de Septiembre
1:00pm ET / 12C / 10am PT



Drawing on the science of learning that emphasizes a family's native language, Literacy Partners co-created two telenovela-style miniseries in Spanish with Univision. The family dramas modeled how parents can promote their children's early literacy development and informal science learning while lifting up the importance of responsive parenting, all in the viewers' home language and cultures. The shows reached 9 million viewers, ranking first or second in the ratings among Hispanic viewers each day they were on the air.

2023

2020-24

Children of Literacy Partners students were thrilled to receive their home library of new books. The science of reading backs their enthusiasm for books in their native language at reading levels their parents can readily master as well.





**BEFORE THERE
WAS INSTAGRAM.**

**BEFORE THE INTERNET
WAS EVEN A THING.**

THERE WAS...

THE COLUMN

Price: 50 cents

New York, 1976

Vol. 50. No. 50

**Liz Smith arrived
in New York City
from Texas in 1949.**

After a variety of writing gigs
and showbiz-related jobs,
Liz landed her own column in
the *Daily News* in 1976 covering
Broadway, Hollywood, and
New York society.



Photo by Fran Collin

During the newspaper strike of 1978, Liz was invited to appear on WNBC-TV's *Live at Five* news program, where she quickly became a fixture on the show, reporting three nights a week for the next eleven years until she was recruited by Barry Diller to create a talk show on Fox.

At WNBC, Liz met Carol Jenkins, who introduced her to Literacy Volunteers of New York City. She was shocked to learn about the hidden epidemic of adult illiteracy in New York and equally amazed to find the solution was right there, hiding in plain sight. **She was hooked.**



Liz, Parker, and Arnold in 1996, ten years into their run organizing the Literacy Partners gala.



In 2002, Liz delivered a toast at the wedding of Arnold Scaasi and Parker Ladd.



Liz and Dan Rather enjoy a laugh together in 1996.

I once begged Parker to leave Arnold and marry me. I thought he would be the ideal husband and I certainly needed one. I told him that later we would adopt Arnold. True blue, Parker turned me down. And now Arnold has missed having a mother like me. But he still has Parker and vice versa and long may these paragons wave. As it turned out, Arnold & Parker as a twosome, a partnership became more important to me than ever I dreamed for they goaded and coerced and nagged me always into doing more for our Literacy Partners project. They had the drive, the ambition, and the determination. They were equally stubborn. And it has become a kind of success it could never have been without them.

Parker and Arnold have made their love work for 40 years. We salute them. We congratulate them. We know why one wise philosopher once said that marriage is an institution many people want to get out of, but wise people are the ones who want to get in.

I still want to get in. Maybe I can talk them into a threesome. Congratulations, darlings!

Liz Smith
July 25 2002
Le Anne

By the 1990s, she wrote for the *New York Post* and *New York Newsday* and was syndicated in seventy newspapers across the country and abroad. Covering – and dishing on – celebrities and New York's glitterati made her a celebrity in her own right and she brought literacy along for the ride.

Liz had many rich and powerful friends. As former board chair Peter Brown once said, "Everyone likes Liz because, really, what's there not to like?" If you were friends with Liz, chances are she'd get you involved in Literacy Partners. **Over the years, there were no better friends and no bigger supporters of Literacy Partners than Liz, Arnold Scaasi, and Parker Ladd.** Together, the trio put literacy on the map and raised over \$25 million to help tens of thousands of adults improve their reading and English skills.

In 2013, Literacy Partners created the **LIZZIE Award** in her honor, presenting it each year at the gala to the advocate for literacy who best embodied her spirit. Nearly ten years later, the core adult and family literacy programs at Literacy Partners were renamed the **Liz Smith Center for Adult & Family Literacy**.

Friends meant the world to Liz, pictured here in 2011 with Lesley Stahl, Joni Evans, and Mary Wells Lawrence, each of whom would go on to receive the LIZZIE Award from Literacy Partners.



LIZ SMITH & FRIENDS



Liz shares a moment with Sirio Maccioni, Kitty Carlisle Hart, and Arnold Scaasi in 2003.



Liz with Brooke Astor and Vartan Gregorian in 1994.



Liz with Ann Patchett in 2008.



Peter Brown, Barbara Walters, and Frank Langella with Liz at the 2007 gala.



Liz hosted the Literacy Partners gala with wit and wisdom, raising awareness and entertaining audiences for three decades.

In addition to the annual gala, Liz organized and hosted numerous other events to benefit Literacy Partners.

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THE GALA

“

I feel confident in my new job
and reading to my daughter at
bedtime. But it is not the end, it
is just the beginning.”

— Sophia Nicholson

1. Alice Walker reads at the 1994 gala.
2. Literacy Partners student Moravet Espinoza with her son reads at the 2018 gala.
3. Literacy Partners student Gicela Jarquin with her family at the 2019 gala.
4. Gala honoree Joanne Lipman and board member Lee Eastman in 2017.
5. Literacy Partners student Sophia Nicholson reads her essay at the 2022 gala.
6. When Liz retired, she asked Cynthia McFadden to join the board and host the gala.

LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF NYC ORGANIZED ITS **FIRST** **FUNDRAISER** IN 1982.

Board Member Carol Jenkins asked her WNBC-TV colleague Liz Smith to help her land a celebrity to appear at the event. Liz assured Carol that she would convince her friend Lena Horne to do it. But Lena was not available and the event raised only \$3,000.

Liz admired the scrappy grassroots organization and loved the cause so she agreed to organize a proper benefit the next year. In 1983, Broadway Salutes Liz Smith raised more than \$130,000, roughly the size of LVNYC's entire annual budget.

After organizing fundraisers of similar impact in 1984 and 1985, Liz enlisted her friend Parker Ladd to help her take the event to the next level. Parker's brainchild was an evening of readings from famous authors with a coordinated call for donations from the publishing industry. The first event in 1986 was hosted by Diane Sawyer and featured readings from Jimmy Breslin, Nora Ephron, William Kennedy, Jay McInerney, as well as LVNYC student leader Calvin Miles. Thus began the Literacy Partners gala.

For the first few years, the event was held in the proverbial "church basement" at St. Peter's Church at the Citicorp Center with a buffet dinner. In 1988, the event moved to Christie's with a light supper, and in 1991 it settled into its new home at

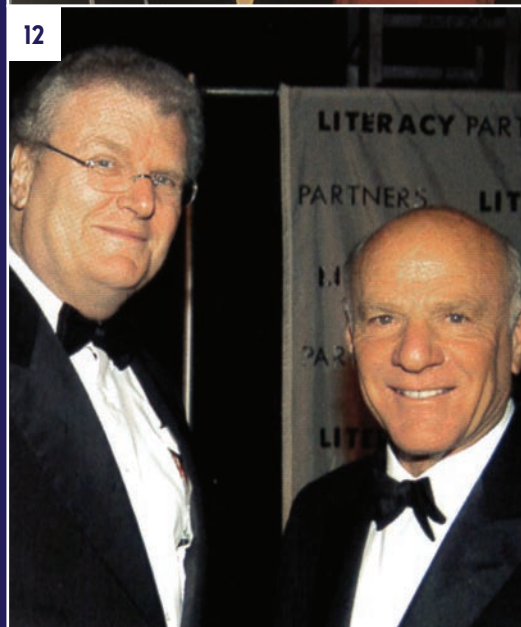
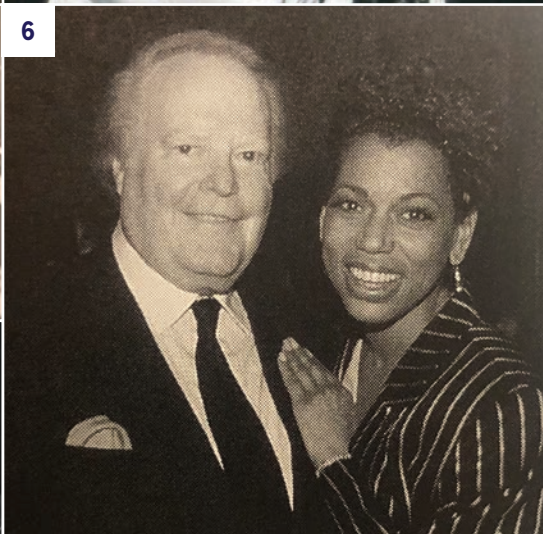
Lincoln Center, where it would remain for twenty-two years.

Around that time, Parker Ladd's partner, Arnold Scaasi, became more involved and the trio of Liz, Parker, and Arnold (as everyone in New York knew them) took the event to higher heights. By 1998, the gala began raising over \$1 million each year, with famous authors, corporate benefactors, celebrities, and a host committee of New York power brokers attending.

By the mid-2010s, after organizing and hosting the gala for nearly thirty years and raising over \$25 million for literacy, Liz, Parker, and Arnold stepped back from their central role and tapped Cynthia McFadden to host the event. The gala continues to honor their legacy, bringing hundreds of people together each year for inspiring readings from students and famous authors and an entertaining evening among friends.

.....
TOP: Barbara Bush with Tom Wolfe, who read at the 1992 event. Bush was an adult literacy advocate and credited Liz Smith with giving her the idea for her own literacy foundation and fundraising events. Arnold Scaasi was her dressmaker when she was First Lady. **MIDDLE:** Liz Smith with Ann Richards and Hillary Clinton in 2004. **BOTTOM:** Bette Midler sings "Happy Birthday" to Arnold Scaasi in 2008.





1. Liz Smith with her first gala cohost, Diane Sawyer, in 1986.
2. Raquel Welch and Lena Horne in 1987.
3. Gala cohost Tom Brokaw and Fran Lebowitz wait their turn at the podium in 1989.
4. Mary Tyler Moore and Arnold Scaasi share an intimate moment in 1993.
5. Board president Sonny Sloan chats with John Updike in 1993.
6. ABC News president Rooney Arledge with board member Rolonda Watts in 1996.
7. Board member, LIZZIE Award recipient, and mega-selling author Barbara Taylor Bradford with Barbara Tober in 1997.
8. Gala chair Veronica Hearst with Daisy Soros, Christine Schwarzman, and Anna Murdoch in 1999.
9. Paula Zahn, George Stephanopolous, and Bebe Neuwirth in 2000.
10. Liz Smith with Joni Evans, Helen Gurley Brown, and board member Marjorie Reed Gordon in 2001.
11. Maury Povitch and Connie Chung in 2003.
12. Howard Stringer and Barry Diller in 2003.
13. Marie Brenner and Joan Ganz Cooney in 2006.
14. Barbara Walters with Deborah Roberts in 2007.



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15. Mort Janklow chats with Harry Evans and Tina Brown in 2007.
16. Board chair Peter Brown with Yoko Ono in 2007.
17. Lee and Bob Woodruff with board member Cynthia McFadden in 2007.
18. LIZZIE Award recipient and board member Jackie Weld Drake with Parker Ladd in 2008.
19. LIZZIE Award winner Elizabeth Peabody and Liz Smith prove their fashion sense at the 2010 gala kickoff cocktail party at Michael's.
20. Priscilla Painton and board member Carolyn Reidy in 2010.
21. Tommy Tune with Literacy Partners student reader Mathew Brown in 2015.
22. Andrew Tisch reads from his edited volume of essays by and about immigrant Americans in 2019. Pictured with Mary Skafidas and Wes Moore.
23. Darnell Moore with gala reader Tayari Jones in 2019.
24. Board member Perri Peltz receives the LIZZIE Award in 2020.
25. Author, podcaster, and publisher Zibby Owens being honored in 2022.
26. Sarah Paulson and Holland Taylor in 2019. Holland accepted the LIZZIE Award in 2023.

ALL-TIME LEADING ADVOCATES & BENEFACTORS

GOLD

Arnold Scaasi
Dorothy Strelsin
Laura Johnson
Joan Ganz Cooney
Parker Ladd
Anna Strasberg
Carolyn Reidy
Barry Diller
Brooke Astor
Annette and Oscar de la Renta
Barbara Taylor Bradford

SILVER

Patricia Cornwell
Wolfgang Flöttl
Celia Farris
Ellen Violet
Ira Leon Rennert
Gillian Fuller
Yoko Ono Lennon
Ann Ziff

Peter Brown
Ralph Lauren
Barbara Goldsmith
Katharine Raymond Hinton
Tina Flaherty
Audrey Gruss
Todd Larsen
Mary Wells Lawrence
Jacqueline Weld Drake
Sally Rinard
Michael Steib
John Josephson
David Koch
Mary Higgins Clark
Mary Tyler Moore
Donald Marron
Leonard Riggio
Lily Safra
Mark Tercek
Matthew Derella
Joni Evans
Lesley Stahl
James Stanko
Courtney Corleto

Cynthia McFadden
Brian Teichman
Lee Eastman
Rupert Murdoch
Harriet Muller-Egan

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Howard Sloan
Adele Bergreen
Barbara Walters
Perri Peltz
Mark Jackson
Joan Linclau
Harold McGraw
Enid Nemy
Elizabeth Peabody
Henry Kravis
Natalie Bergstein
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1977-1980
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1980-1982
Winifred L. Brown
1982-1986
Nancy McCord
1986-1988
Walter Kiechel
1988-1991
James I. Stanko
1991-1993
Sonny Sloan
1994
Arnold J. Schaab
1994-1998
Clare R. Gregorian
1998-2001
Liz Smith
2001-2004
Mark Tercek
2004-2007
Peter Brown
2007-2010

Mark Jackson
2010-2014
John Josephson
2014-2016
Mike Steib
2014-2019
Katharine Raymond Hinton
2016-2023
Courtney E. K. Lewis
2023-

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Dianne Kangisser
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Alesia Edwards
1984-1985
Eli Zal
1985-1991
Lilliam Barrios Paoli
1992-1993
Boby List
1994-1995

Jon Deveaux
1995-2002
Deborah Lynne
2002-2003
Susan McClean
2003-2012
Anthony Tassi
2013-2024



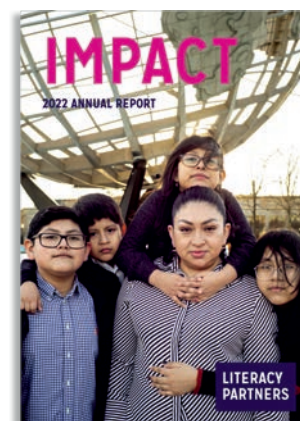
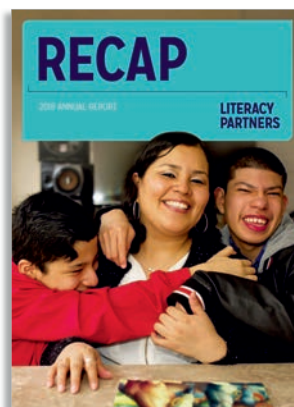
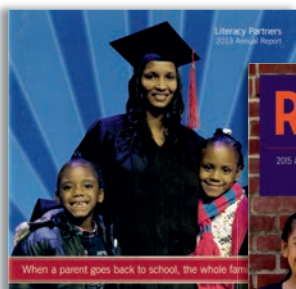
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Das Family Foundation
Meringoff Family Foundation



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing the history of Literacy Partners is no easy task. In the end, a full account could be authored only by the thousands of students, volunteers, staff, directors, and donors who have embodied the organization's noble mission.

This view of the story was compiled by Anthony Tassi. Joni Evans and Cynthia McFadden provided sage advice at just the right time. So did Azadeh Khalili.

Lorna Torres made a major contribution to this publication, as did Anne Sanderson, Adrienne Metzinger, Chris Manna, Sung E Bai, and Kristine Cooper. Special thanks to Allison Sciplin, Claudia Meyers, Saritte Rogers, Danit Cohen, and Nancy Eastman.

This publication was only possible by the generosity and commitment of Jon Yaged and the extraordinary team at Macmillan Publishers: Barbara Cho, Raymond Ernesto Colón, Emily Mahar, Christopher O'Connell, Leslie Padgett, Kenn Russell, Christopher Sergio, and James Sinclair.

Literacy Partners is grateful to the many great photographers whose work captured the mission over fifty years and may appear in this publication uncredited, including Patrick McMullan, Billy Farrell, Mary Hilliard, Mark Gurevich, Robert Wynn, Charlie Samuels, Kristine Larsen, Nick Hunt, Ben Russel, Jonica Moore, and Diane Green.

Design by Adler Branding and Marketing.

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