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LITERACY
PARTNERS

WINTER 2021

The Health Equity Issue

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Reading Changes Everything



Dear friend,

If you feel like you haven't read a Literacy Partners newsletter in a long time, it's because you haven't.

With Covid-19, we had to reinvent ourselves for remote learning after nearly a half century of in-person classroom instruction. We had to address many new needs of our low-income and immigrant students and their families, whose communities were impacted the most by the pandemic and the compounding effects of racism and poverty, which made everything worse.

Like everyone else, we pivoted. We pivoted hard. But, something had to give. As we redeployed every resource at our disposal to our new digital-first education program, we no longer had the bandwidth to produce our printed newsletter.

But, we're back. And we have an amazing story to tell.

We have amazing stories of the power and resilience of low-income and immigrant families; the dedication of so many parents to transform the lives of their children and create a brighter future for their family.

We also have a story of our organizational transformation: a commitment to health equity through a new dedicated program to boost the health literacy skills of our students and help them access medical care for their family. In the Covid-19 era, what could be more important?

Ultimately, ours is a story of gratitude. We are incredibly thankful to you – our key supporters -- who stood by our families throughout this terrible time and remembered that literacy is an essential service. Reading, writing, and speaking English are basic needs that we as a society must meet to move towards racial equity and social justice.

As always, I hope you take pride in what you've helped us accomplish. Please drop me a line at anthonyt@literacypartners.org to share your thoughts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anthony'.

Anthony Tassi, CEO

**LITERACY
PARTNERS**

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New York, NY 10038

We strengthen families through a two-generation approach to education. With our free classes, workshops, and educational media, low-income and immigrant parents build the literacy and language skills they need for success in today's world and to better promote their children's early learning, social emotional growth, and school readiness.

New York Times Helps Literacy Partners Launch Health Equity Program

Of all the forms of inequality, Martin Luther King Jr. famously said in 1966, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.

With generous support from the New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, Literacy Partners has created a new Health Equity program to tackle these injustices. Our health equity program builds the health literacy skills of our students and ensures they and their families have timely access to essential health care, starting with the Covid-19 vaccines. The program is overseen by a new Health Equity Manager who supervises a team of social work interns.

This effort builds on a pilot program we ran last year that resulted in an increase in overall child vaccination rates among the families we serve, from 72% to 91%, and a dramatic 64% increase in parents indicating they could understand their pediatrician's advice. This increase in comprehension is critically important because health care providers have found that low literacy and lack of English proficiency among parents of pediatric patients is the most common detriment to family health. But, historically, they have not had a reliable place to refer these families for educational services.



Our Health Equity Program solves this problem by creating referral relationships from these healthcare providers to our English for Parents classes, which now integrate health literacy (skills you need to access care, manage your health, and make good decisions for your family) into the curriculum, along with topics related to parenting and child development and basic overall English communication skills.

Through our classes, parents improve their skills in each of these three domains with immediate benefit to themselves and their children. Their new skills and the work of our Health Equity Manager have increased Covid-19 vaccination rates among our students to more than 80%. Their improved ability to navigate the healthcare system will provide long term benefits to their families.



Meet Romelia Corvacho Our New Health Equity Manager

Romelia, or Romy as her friends and family call her, grew up on the outskirts of Lima, Peru and escaped to the US in 1992 from the political violence terrorizing the country. She joined Literacy Partners in September, 2021.

Welcome to Literacy Partners, Romelia. Tell us about your background and why you are so passionate about the work you do.

When I was a teenager, a terrorist group made my home country unlivable for me and my family. My school was bombed and many of my fellow students perished. Threatened for our lives, my parents took me and my sister from the country and fled to America, in search of safety and a better life.

America is a land of opportunity, but also a land of struggle. One of the most difficult struggles was to learn the language and the culture here. I remember working long hours in factory jobs and as a cleaning lady, most of the time below minimum wage, while at the same time studying English at night.

I know the struggles that I've faced were opportunities. This led me to discover my true calling in life. I felt it was my duty to help communities in need, to help them become empowered. That is why I became a Community Health Worker and later went to college to obtain a degree.

"I pass on my learnings to the families I serve, so maybe one day my efforts will help another undocumented immigrant avoid the losses I suffered."

I faced so many challenges, but I learned a lot about negotiating the system and relying on your own strengths and abilities. It's a passion born from experience. I pass on my learnings to the families I serve, so maybe one day my efforts will help another undocumented immigrant avoid the losses I suffered.

That's amazing. And, when you consider the pandemic and the ways in which African American and immigrant communities have been impacted by COVID - how do you think literacy or lack thereof has impacted their lives?

Our complex healthcare system can be challenging to navigate under the best of circumstances and these challenges are compounded for those who are uninsured, undocumented, living in poverty or have limited English proficiency. Covid-19 makes their lives even more complex and stressful, causing family and community conflicts and making mental health issues worse. Communication and education is always important, but the literacy question is doubly important now when people have to access information, make decisions, take actions, follow directions etc. to take care of their families and keep themselves safe in a really important and immediate way. Now, prevalence of misinformation combined with people's inability to validate the sources of the information they absorb, makes literacy during Covid-19 even more critical.

Absolutely. As you take on this new role at Literacy Partners, what are some of the key goals you hope to achieve?

1. To develop a resource center for all our students and their families who are being affected by inequities related to health -- starting with access to Covid-19 vaccines -- so they can get assistance in accessing care and protecting their family's health.
2. To establish close partnerships with healthcare providers so when they see parents of their pediatrics patients who can't read and write or can't speak English, they will have someplace to refer the parents to continue their education.
3. To have a comprehensive training opportunity for our social work interns, and leadership development opportunities for our students who want to help empower their community.



When not working to improve health care delivery in communities across New York, Romy is a fitness enthusiast. She is also an avid runner and ran the 2019 New York City Marathon.

STUDENT STORY

Meet Antonia Bernal Our New Parent Ambassador



Antonia Bernal is one of those people you meet every so often who can really inspire you. The 24-year old mother arrived in the US from her native Mexico five years ago. Speaking no English and having no family or close connections, Antonia landed in New York with the determination to pursue her version of the American Dream. She took whatever work she could find to make ends meet. She soon found regular work as a babysitter, got married, and had a baby girl of her own.

All seemed like a fairytale dream come true until her newborn baby, Alexa, became ill. When she took a turn for the worse, they rushed her to the hospital,

only to be met with the chaos of a medical emergency when nobody speaks your language. At the time, the only available interpreters at the hospital were Russian speakers.

Antonia and her husband could not communicate what was wrong with their baby. Feeling powerless and helpless, they had to relinquish their baby to the doctors and trust that they would do well by baby Alexa. The doctors kept the baby in the hospital overnight and sent the parents away.

"We feel so scared to watch Alexa be taken away from us and we don't understand what is going on," said Antonia. "We had no choice but to trust the doctors and that they know what they are doing."

All turned out well with Alexa, but several months later Antonia and her family faced another harrowing experience: their apartment building caught fire. With her baby in her arms, Antonia and her husband frantically tried to escape the building.

Fire squads ordered evacuation instructions in English, which neither she nor her husband could understand. Finally, the American Red Cross came to the rescue, providing interpretation, and arranging for each family to spend two nights in a hotel. Two days later, homeless, without any money or their belongings, and still in shock from the fire, Antonia called a friend, who offered to let them double up in their apartment while getting back on their feet.

But, the challenges didn't stop there. Once they were settled in a new apartment, Antonia's husband faced an unexpected medical problem. This time it wasn't a trip to the emergency room, but a different set of daunting challenges: having to make appointments with multiple doctors, ambiguity and uncertainty of his condition, differing medical opinions, etc. The result of poor communication and limited support was that he never received the care he needed until the problem grew so severe that he needed surgery.

In the midst of all this, Antonia decided she would go to school to learn English, doing whatever it takes to balance school with her long working hours and being a mother. The Literacy Partners English for Parents classes, with our emphasis on child development and health literacy in addition to basic English skills, were a terrific fit for Antonia. She took advantage of the many opportunities to practice speaking English with her teacher and our volunteer conversation partners. Antonia excelled in the supportive environment, made rapid progress, and asked if there were more she could do.

Romelia Corvacho, our Health Equity Manager, felt Antonia would be a terrific Parent Ambassador for our program, knowing that what she learned in class and from her experience trying to access health care could help other parents in similar situations. In her new role, we quickly learned that Antonia could also help healthcare providers improve their customer service so that other immigrant families didn't have to face such daunting challenges in accessing care.



"I am so passionate about this work and for helping other parents like me."

Antonia turned out to be a natural leader. One afternoon this fall, she bravely stood in front of a room of 40 doctors at a Bronx hospital to share her testimony of navigating the system as an immigrant mother.

"At first I was scared and I didn't think I can do it," Antonia says. "But, I tell myself that this is an important moment for my life, and a chance to share my experiences with doctors so they can understand how it is for people like me."

As our first Parent Ambassador, Antonia has had an important impact on our students and our healthcare referral partners. "I am so grateful for this opportunity," says Antonia. "Thank you to Romy for her trust and confidence in me. I am so passionate about this work and for helping other parents like me."

A BIG THANKS TO THE DOROTHY STRELSIN FOUNDATION

We are grateful for the Dorothy Strelsin Foundation's generous gift to establish the Dorothy Strelsin Foundation Endowment, which will bring the joy of reading to families for years to come.