

# Community

Stories by Adult Learners



Partners in Reading  
Adult Literacy and ESL  
San José Public Library



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Stories by Adult Learners



**PARTNERS  
IN READING**  
San José Public Library

Adult Literacy and ESL  
2022

# ***Community*** **Production Team**



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The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the San José Public Library, the City of San José, or any other funders of the Partners in Reading program. No official endorsement by these agencies should be inferred.



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## **Tribute to Ellen Hill, Partners in Reading Volunteer Since 2002**



This book is dedicated to one of Partners in Reading's longest serving volunteers. Ellen Hill began volunteering long before our current staff started working for PAR. She was working as a full-time teacher of special education students in a high need San José elementary school. Ellen devoted her life to service. She gained a lot of joy and fulfillment from this work, some of it paid, and a stunning amount of unpaid work.

Besides a long teaching career of many decades, Ellen served in the Peace Corps. After retirement from teaching, Ellen spent most of her waking hours volunteering and using her mix of special skills to help others in her community. She was an avid trail builder, and since she could build and fix many things, she was suited to helping two organizations whose missions are to build and repair homes, Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together. With her excellent organizational skills, she transformed chaos into order by organizing and labeling all of the equipment for large building projects. How do you keep a shop floor clean, safe, and organized



with 200 paint rollers and stirring sticks, and so on? You bring in Ellen Hill to make sure that other volunteers know where to find all the equipment and where to put it back (clean and ready for the next person to use).

Similarly, if there were a mess in the Partners in Reading office and storage spaces, Ellen figured out a way to organize the tens of thousands of books that have come in and out of the PAR office to get in the hands of customers, whether they were workbooks for the adults in the program or children's giveaway books. She drew on her vast and lengthy experience managing her classroom for so many years to think of and create learning projects for the family literacy packages sent out six times a year.

Many of you reading this book likely attended one of the Partners in Reading events where a nondescript meeting room was transformed. Ellen worked with volunteer Sue Rizzi to create magical table decorations to make the room and the event festive and cheerful.

Finally, Ellen joined PAR all those years ago to be a volunteer tutor. She met with two learners in particular for a very long time and went out of her way to help them, to accommodate their schedules, and to make sure that her instruction was learner centered. J. said that she misses Ellen because she was such a good tutor and always found a way to help her. If PAR offered a workshop, Ellen was there to help learners who didn't have a tutor there with them or to learn some new techniques or strategies. Then she stayed to the bitter end to help clean up and organize all the supplies and equipment.

We appreciate Ellen and remember her for her kindness, warmth, and sense of humor. She always had a kind word or a joke and devoted her

life to serving and helping others. She was flexible and would always adjust her schedule to meet the needs of her learners.

In summary, Ellen was an amazing volunteer who thrived because of her service to others. When she died suddenly in November 2021, she left a gaping hole for all those people and agencies she touched. We miss her very much because she did so many things for the staff, the learners, and for other volunteers. We are trying to continue to use the systems she put in place so we can stay organized.



# Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to the adults who work so hard each week to continuously build skills and deepen involvement in community. We salute you and admire your persistence during often very difficult circumstances. You lead very busy lives, but you prioritize education. Nothing could be more challenging than emerging from a once-in-a-century pandemic that has upended our lives for almost three years (so far). You have found ways to keep learning, despite the upheaval all around you. Some of you have chosen to write terrific stories as part of the learning opportunities available to you. If this is your first story, welcome to this distinguished group of authors. We hope you will write a story next year as well. If this is not your first story, then you know very well how great it feels to be published. Keep going!

Partners in Reading (PAR) volunteers supply the time, talent, and compassion to make these partnerships worthwhile and productive. PAR volunteers help learners build confidence and independence by supporting their partners' efforts to improve their skills and celebrate successes. We appreciate the unique challenges these partnerships have faced while tutoring during the pandemic and want to especially thank our volunteers for their dedication.

PAR is eternally grateful to the San José Public Library, the San José Public Library Foundation, the City of San José, and the California State Library. Each of these organizations values learning, collaboration, and innovation while offering material support. PAR is very lucky to have a generous budget to support learners and volunteers, to showcase materials that

foster learning, and to provide places to meet and learn together. This web of support enables meaningful relationships and progress during tutoring sessions and throughout the match.

We also want to offer thanks to MaryLee McNeal, who for more than 14 years has provided excellent materials and has facilitated a workshop to assist learners in beginning the creative process of writing. MaryLee breaks down the topic and the writing process so that learners can feel a sense of accomplishment during one session, before meeting with their tutor to finish their stories. Writing a published essay becomes less daunting when it is broken down into easy to follow steps.

# **Partners in Reading Appreciates Your Continued Support**

## **2021–2022 Funders**

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- California State Library, California Library Literacy Services
- San José Public Library Foundation

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- Trader Joe's
- Happy Hollow

## Introduction to *Community*

This book by Partners in Reading (PAR) learners is a testament to how resilient the PAR community is. The last 2½ years have challenged everyone to work differently for the health and safety of the community. The difficult barriers we have faced have also given us time and space to learn and succeed at new things we didn't anticipate having to learn.

The pandemic has given us opportunities for growth. It has been exciting to watch learners, tutors, and staff not only adapt to these challenges, but also to overcome them with newfound skills. These changes have not come easily, but it feels as though everyone associated with PAR has been learning new things and building confidence. Since adults are lifelong learners, it is appropriate that we are all learning together and helping each other.

We have seen some brave tutors and learners come back to libraries because the best learning environment takes place together. Others are waiting until it feels safe to meet in person. A third group is sticking with remote learning on Zoom and other platforms and have found ways to make it work. In whatever ways learners and tutors come together, we salute you. For those of you who chose to write a story, PAR is very happy to showcase your creativity here, in this book. We hope you enjoy seeing your story in print and that you always find ways to build, celebrate, and enjoy *Community*.

## Program Highlights

Partners in Reading (PAR), the adult literacy program of the San José Public Library (SJPL) helps adults in San José build basic literacy, speaking, and technology skills. We partner with local community organizations such as Catholic Charities to offer ESL classes. The newest project underway is gearing up to offer individualized ESL tutoring through a new California Library Literacy Services grant.

As we emerge from the pandemic, PAR is hoping to encourage pairs who have been on hiatus to return to in-person learning if they feel comfortable. Many learners and volunteers have grown more comfortable with online learning, especially after learning about the convenience and flexibility of meeting virtually.

Technology has become much more important for everyone since 2020. It is especially tricky if someone is not only unsure of technology but also has challenges reading what is on the screen. During the lockdown, several PAR learners set goals of gaining new technology skills and accessing online resources from the library. As virtual tutoring became a safer alternative to meeting in person, it was apparent that gaining access to digital resources would be an important goal for the PAR community. With the help of PAR computer lab volunteers and the library's Chromebooks and hotspots, many learners were able to meet those goals and learn other life skills along the way.

Some volunteers offer weekly small classes online, and learners have chosen to attend those while waiting for an individual tutor. In many cases, learners are doing both. Small classes, ranging from conversation



to grammar to learning about Broadway musicals, have captured the interest of a wide variety of learners. As we slowly shift to meeting in person again, it is heart-warming to see learners warmly greet each other and catch up with the friends they have made from the online classes. Whether it be online or in person, we certainly have a supportive community.

PAR staff meets with the community at in-person events, such as Viva Parks. We share information about PAR and SJPL services and invite people to join us as either a volunteer or learner. We give away books and toys to children if they bring a parent with them to learn about PAR.

Every other month PAR offers free children's books to children of PAR adult learners who are under 14 years old. Together with any relevant parenting information, volunteer tutors receive and review this material during tutoring so that adult learners are comfortable using it with their children.

PAR is in its seventh year of offering an online high school diploma and career certificate through Smart Horizons. So far, 143 students have graduated, and more will follow. Congratulations to all of the Career Online High School graduates who now have more opportunities awaiting them after all their hard work!

We are excited to learn what new programs and events will enable PAR to offer services to the San José community.



***Community***  
**Stories by Adult Learners**

*“All things are connected like the blood that unites us. We do not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves.”*

**– Chief Seattle**

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## My Connection With Weddings at My Church

*By Abraham B.*

When I came to the U.S.A. from Eritrea, I was happy to find the same service of helping friends and family in the community as back home.

At my church in San José, we are a community. We have different, small teams that help different people in the church. I belong to a team that volunteers to help with a part of every wedding that takes place in my church. My team meets with the couple being married and we plan to make sure everything goes smoothly on the wedding day for the guests and family. We are in charge of making the wedding guests feel welcome and comfortable on the big day. We greet the guests as they arrive for the morning service and make sure they are seated in the church. Many guests have not attended our church before, so we want them to feel comfortable and know where the facilities are in the building.

I wear special clothes from my country so people know to find me easily for any questions. There is a photo of me in a white robe, and the scarf over my shoulder is the Eritrean flag.

*(continued)*



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After the wedding, the family and friends of the newly married couple go to the Rose Garden in San José for photographs and light refreshments. Then, back at the church hall, there is a reception. My team guides the family and friends to be seated at the tables for dinner. After the minister has made the blessings, there are speeches and toasts, and then we announce which tables go to the buffet line for their food. We make sure everyone is happy and enjoying the celebration of the newly married couple.

I feel very good to be a part of organizing the weddings at my church. It is a happy occasion, and I enjoy being a part of the community at my church.



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# My Faith is My Community

*By Robert Byers*

My community is Apostles Lutheran Church in San José.

One group is my Bible Study class. There are eight people in our group. Our leader is Mark. The other members are Jimmy, Marie, Laura, Marina, Joe, Dave and me. We meet once or twice a month on Monday evening at seven o'clock. Sometimes we meet in person or sometimes we meet on Zoom. Sometimes between classes, I meet with Jimmy and Marie at their house to prepare for the next meeting. Jimmy showed me an easier way to read the Bible. Mark asks each of us to read a Bible verse. Then we discuss the meaning and how we can learn from the verse.

Also I attend services on Saturday evenings. I look forward to talking to my friends after church. Attending church activities is a great opportunity to meet our Apostles Lutheran family and to make new friends.



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Robert's church is a big influence in his life.

*(continued)*

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Apostles Lutheran Church cares about its community and supports it in several ways. For Easter and Christmas, our church has special activities, like a sunrise service and a toy drive for children. The church also has collections to help veterans. Our pastor visits people who are disabled or elderly and cannot come to church services. I have learned to become a better person. That's why I became a Christian. We study and live by God's word.



Photo Credit: Apostles Lutheran Church in San José

*“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.”*

– Coretta Scott King



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## A Community Resource

*By Veronica Delgado Flores*

My community at the Family Resource Center (FRC) means a lot to me. FRC works with kids birth to five years old and gives classes for parents on how they can help their children.

I found this community when my daughter was four years old. I used to go with her to the center and stay to enjoy the activities. The children listened to stories, danced, and did art projects. After my daughter turned five and started kindergarten, I continued to go to the FRC as a volunteer, because it is my pleasure to help others. Setting up for the classes and assisting individuals with the activities are a few of the many things I do.

In this community I have learned many things as a parent. One thing I learned was how important the first five years of a child's life are, and I learned how I can be part of this process. The FRC really cares about their community. If they don't have the information or resources that a family needs, they make a referral to another agency.

*(continued)*



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Veronica wrote about her community because she is so happy to be part of it.

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Now I am part of the team. I have been more involved now that I know what happens behind the scenes. Every time they are going to give a class, either for the children or their parents, they put in a lot of effort and preparation. This includes encouraging people to attend and studying the subject of the class. Now we only have a couple of rooms. My vision for the future is to have a big building where we have more resources to offer to the families.



Family Resource Center

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# My Church, My Friends, My Community, and God's World

*By Monica Fernandez*

My community in San José, California is very good. In my community, I go to my favorite places like McDonald's and other restaurants. I live in the downtown area. I live in a board and care home. In my community, I have a lot of friends. Downtown San José has so much stuff to do. I love to go to work in my community. Some places I worked are Hope Services, Great America, McDonald's, and Jack in the Box. I love to be in my community and be with my friends. All my friends are in my city. We love the park. I love my church. I am a Stephen minister in my community.

The community is very different now. I miss the events that we had in the community before COVID-19. I was working at Hope Thrift Store. I was shocked because they announced that COVID-19 hit. I was surprised because I was very happy working there. I could not believe what they were saying. I was on a roll, and I thought it was the end of the world. It made me feel like I was fired from my job, but I wasn't fired. When my supervisor told me that I could go back to Hope Thrift Store again, I felt very blessed and very lucky that I had a job in my community. Thank God the community is getting back to normal.



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Monica wrote this story because she loves to write her own stories and have them published.

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# My Best Friend

*By Consuelo*

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This is the first time Consuelo has had a dog. She loves to take care of her dog and feels motivated to walk with Pimpon.

My dog is friendly. When my sister and my nieces come to my house, Pimpon is waiting to give my family a hug. One day, Pimpon went out the back door to the yard. I went outside to look for Pimpon, but I didn't see him.

I asked the neighbors, "Did you see the white dog I lost this morning?"

One neighbor said, "I saw the dog on the street with somebody who lives in the shelter."

I went to the shelter office and the person told me the dog was not there. I felt bad. I loved Pimpon, but I hoped a good family found him.

My mom didn't like Pimpon to live inside the house.

After three months, a lady walked her dog on the street. My sister told me the dog looked the same as Pimpon.

I asked the lady if her dog looked like the dog I lost three months ago. She told me the dog came to her yard. She was waiting for somebody to look for him. She lived in the shelter but nobody looked for him.



Friday and Coco share a moment on the lawn at Santana Row Park. Photo credit: [www.sanjose.org/dogblog](http://www.sanjose.org/dogblog)

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She named the dog Friendly for two reasons. He is friendly and the street name is Friendly.

She gave me back the dog.

My niece is happy because they are the same age, and they play together.

I like to walk with Pimpon in the community. I talk with old and positive people. I have good conversations with them.

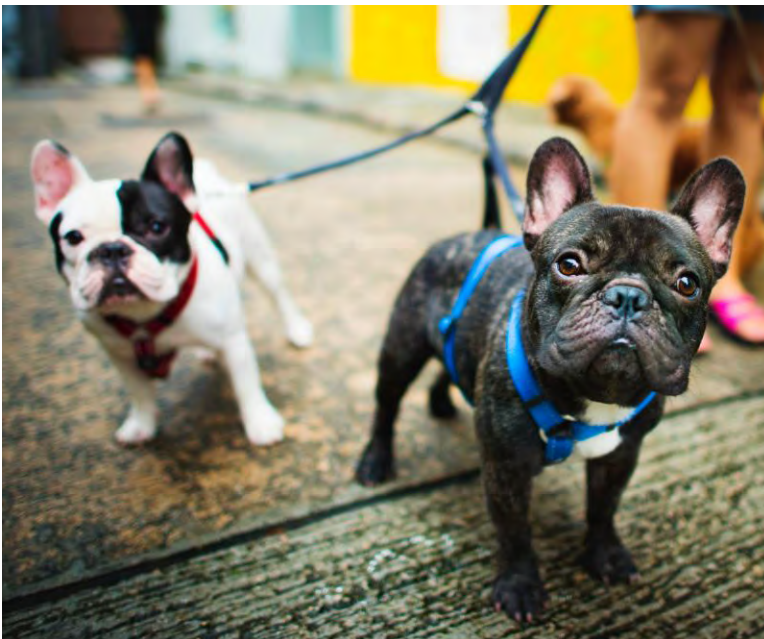


Photo credit: [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322868#How-dogs-keep-you-in-good-health](https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322868#How-dogs-keep-you-in-good-health)

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# My Work Neighborhood

*By Herman Haro*

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Herman wrote this story because he wants to describe the way his work community functions and how his team helps customers.

I belong to a work community at a local car dealership. The community I am part of is the service department. We share this community with service advisors, technicians, porters, car washers, managers and customers. We all work as a team, and once a month we all have lunch together and talk about the dealership's progress and how we are doing. For one Christmas we had a party, and they made the show room look like a huge casino and we used fake money. There were a lot of prizes, food and drinks.

While I'm in my community I hear a lot of conversations from customers and advisors talking about new features for the latest model cars. When the car arrives, the greeter greets the customer and directs them to the service advisor. The service advisor asks the customer what type of service they need. Then they explain the solutions for the symptoms. It's a fast-paced work environment with cars always moving from the driveway to the shop.

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I always hear cars that need repair because they are making very odd noises. The noises I hear are flat tires, brakes squeaking and grinding, and engine problems. I can see a lot of different colors, shapes and sizes of cars throughout the dealership and parking lot. I enjoy being part of this work community because I work with a lot of people throughout the day, and I also learn new things.



*“A community that learns together excels together.  
We need to form communities that learn together.”*

– Robert Reed

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# The Best Thing That Happened to Me

*By Dolores Hernandez*

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Dolores wrote this story to show how Sunnyvale Community Services helped her. They helped her learn English and get a job.

My name is Dolores Hernandez. I have been living in this country since 1982. For me it was very hard to emigrate from Mexico. But my decision was the correct one because it gave my children the opportunity to have a better life. I struggled a lot to learn English, a new language.

I enrolled two of my children in school, my daughter, Dolores, 7 and my son, Enrique, 5, and I was pregnant with the last one, Emmanuel. When I enrolled my children in school, the school recommended Sunnyvale Community Services for me. It is an organization that benefits people with food, addresses medical issues, and finds them jobs. My first job was cleaning an ice cream shop. Then I continued as a volunteer for Sunnyvale Community Services. They helped me in other areas. They also helped me get a job caring for the elderly.

Sunnyvale Community Services encouraged me to study home care and gave me a lot of support. When I finished my degree, they helped me get patients for which to take care. As a caretaker, I help people with their physical and emotional needs.



Photo credit: [www.facebook.com/sunnyvalecommunity-services/](http://www.facebook.com/sunnyvalecommunity-services/)



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Thanks to Sunnyvale Community Services, I could afford to pay college tuition for my children. I don't have sufficient words to thank my community for all the help and support they gave me when I most needed it. The community still provides help for me through the San José Public Library and its participants and volunteers. Now I feel very comfortable conversing in English.



Volunteers with Sunnyvale Community Services food pantry  
Photo credit: [www.foodpantries.org/li/sunnyvale\\_community\\_services\\_94086](http://www.foodpantries.org/li/sunnyvale_community_services_94086)

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## Dancing Community Brings Me Happiness

*By Joyce*



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Joyce likes to dance and share her experience with other people.

I belong to a community of volunteers that share their talent.

First, I discovered their website. I pondered deeply and courageously contacted them. I appreciated that I was invited to join this club. The director arranged for me to be in the Chinese Classical dance club and she showed me how the groups work and what they do.

Next, in our club, we chose a current popular dance and some different kinds of performance costumes.

Then, we practiced the dance together once a week for two to three hours at the studio in her house. If any dancer had difficulty with a dance, we would bring ourselves down to their level so that we were well balanced. We tried our best to dance and show our great teamwork. We had great patience to help each other. When we were practicing our dance, we laughed and enjoyed each other. We built many great friendships.

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Finally, the director would find a place for us to perform or our club was invited to perform somewhere. We performed many kinds of dances five times a year in many places such as senior homes, libraries, health centers, and City Hall. When we finished performing, they gave us some food, some drinks and a certificate of appreciation.



I joined this club in 2017 until the start of the pandemic. In the course of that time, I had an opportunity to dance with many people who have been kind and welcoming. Dancing can be healthy and it brings us together in a way we each need.



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# My Special Community

*By Maria Lizaola*

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Maria wrote about her community because the community makes her feel that everyone is a family.

I belong to a special community. There is a group of ladies working together for my neighborhood, and we are volunteers. We do projects such as community cleaning, sorting food and fundraising.

One of the things we do is clean up the streets in my neighborhood. Once a month we get together at the community garden. The president assigns where we will work and who will be partners. We spend the morning picking up trash. After a few hours, the president has something for the group to eat, like sandwiches.

Once a month we also help give out food from Second Harvest. A truckload of food comes to the parking lot of a school named ACE. We volunteers are already there. We take the food from the truck and we set up the tables so we can start passing out the food. We give out chicken, milk and vegetables. At the end of the day, we clean up.

We have a group chat on Facebook to inform the group of information from City Hall in San José. These announcements happen twice a week or more. Some



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examples are where we can go for COVID testing, places to get vaccines or what we can do if we have problems with the landlord.

We also get together to help each other out in difficult times. For example, when my grandmother passed away, the group did a fundraiser by going door to door asking for donations for her. They also had a food sale. They raised this money even though she was not related to them. It really touched my heart.

I love being part of this group because of the community service we do and how we take care of each other.



Guadalupe River Park Conservancy volunteers  
Photo credit: <https://grpg.org/get-involved/volunteer/>

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# Helping is Life, Life is Helping

*By Porfiria Lopez*



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Porfiria wrote about this community because she has learned a lot there, and it makes her feel happy and useful.

I'm going to write about the Sacred Heart Community Service. There are a lot of people who go to this community center. Some are paid workers, some are volunteers, and some are there to receive help with finances, clothing, food, education, counseling, legal matters and housing.

The community center is located at 1381 S.1<sup>st</sup> Street, San José, California.

When I took English classes at the library in 2011, it was a requirement for learners to do some volunteer work if they wanted to keep their classes. My teacher showed me possible locations where I could volunteer, and I chose Sacred Heart. Then when my children had to do volunteer work in middle school and were too young to go alone, I accompanied them and showed them what to do. We sorted clothes, packed food, and cleaned.

I was impressed to see all the clothes and food items that are available to those who need them. The center provides any color, size and type—fancy,

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simple, light, heavy—of clothing and accessories for men, women and children. It also offers a wide variety of food such as, meat, chicken, eggs, cheese, oats, milk, fruit in season, vegetables, canned food, cereal, bread, beans and tortillas.

Sacred Heart is important to me because I can contribute my work and feel useful and happy, donate things, and recommend it to people who need it. In the future, I hope to continue volunteering there. It is definitely a great help to many people in our community!

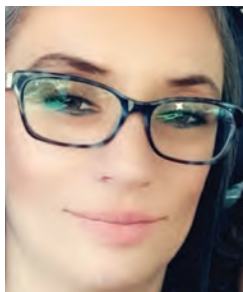


Photo credit: Sacred Heart Community Service  
[www.sacredheartcs.org/mission-vision-history](http://www.sacredheartcs.org/mission-vision-history)

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## A Place to Volunteer

*By Yaneth*



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Yaneth was born in Mexico and has lived in San José for 13 years. She is married and has one child. His name is Isaac. Yaneth likes volunteering and studying English. She enjoys cooking, and her favorite dish is enchiladas.

I like going to Educare. Educare is an early learning center. It is for children from infant to preschool age. I feel welcome in this community. I feel relaxed and happy when I'm at Educare.

I first went to Educare with my son when he was two years old. Together we practiced dance and movement. This helped my son's motor skills and language development. We also listened to music. The songs taught the children numbers and letters. My son learned to share. He learned to play with other children.

I was able to talk with other moms. We talked about our children's behavior and other things. Now my son is eight years old, and he goes to school.

I am now a volunteer at Educare. I like helping with other programs they offer. I continue to learn at Educare. I learn about health, nutrition and stress reduction. I enjoy talking with the staff and other volunteers. We are friends. Most of all, I enjoy Educare because it is in person, not on Zoom.



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# My Neighborhood

*By Maribel*

I live in a wonderful neighborhood located in East San José. Its name is McKinley Bonita. I have lived here with my family since 2004. Bonita means beautiful in Spanish, and my neighborhood is beautiful.

We moved here because some of our friends live here, and we wanted to live close to them. When we first moved to this place I was not too happy, because our home is smaller than our last apartment.

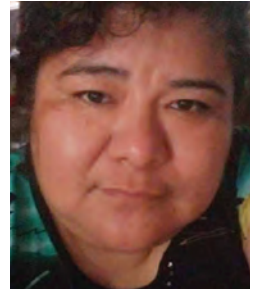
Very close to my house is the East Branch of the San José Public Library. When my older son was little, I would bring him here to find books to read. Later, when he was older and started college, he suggested I join the PAR program. I joined PAR to improve my English skills.

When I started to work with my tutor, I really wanted to learn how to use a computer.

The first thing I did was create an email account and start to learn more about technology.

I was so excited to start learning more that I found computer classes. I learned how to use different

*(continued)*



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Maribel has lived in San José, California for 20 years. She decided to write about her neighborhood because she enjoys it and wanted to share her story about what community means to her.



Library staff and volunteers are available to help you with tech questions during online computer assistance sessions.

Photo credit:  
[www.sjpl.org/sjaccess](http://www.sjpl.org/sjaccess)

computer programs for writing emails, presentations and spreadsheets.

Looking back, I am so glad I took the computer classes, because when the pandemic started, I was able to start classes online with the library. I am continuing my education and improving my English skills. I am taking many different classes during the week.

I am looking forward to getting my high school diploma with Career Online High School. I'm very lucky to find people who encourage and help me to find many kinds of resources at the library close to my house. As you can see, my neighborhood is BEAUTIFUL.



East San José Carnegie Branch Library  
Photo credit: [www.sjpl.org/east-branch](http://www.sjpl.org/east-branch)

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# Municipal Rose Garden

*By Manju Shahi*

I live in San José. My community is wonderful. There is a well-developed infrastructure in my neighborhood. I like public transportation, public parks and gardens, museums, libraries, the Winchester Mystery House, the Tech Interactive, etc. I like the most beautiful and happy place, the San José Municipal Rose Garden. I go there to get relief from stress.

The Rose Garden is a wonderful place for recreation. People of all ages enjoy seeing the different varieties of colorful and fragrant rose beds, shrubs and arches. It is located at 1649 Naglee Avenue and Dana Avenue in San José. There was a prune orchard there in 1927, owned by the City. John McLaren designed the Rose Garden. It was officially dedicated to the public free of cost on April 7, 1937. It is San José Historic Landmark Number 102.

I feel the Rose Garden is the most beautiful, peaceful, sensitive, healthy, comfortable and happy place. I visited the Rose Garden for the very first time on March 15, 2015, and since then I visit frequently in my leisure time on my own. I wish I could see the

*(continued)*

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Manju was a professional teacher in Nepal. She has been living in the U.S. since 2013 on her own. Nature impacts her positively and boosts her mood so she can happily meet challenges.

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amazing scenery of colorful roses and smell fragrances at the Rose Garden with my family and friends.

I feel people in my neighborhood definitely enjoy visiting the San José Municipal Rose Garden and seeing its water fountain from very close to be able to hear the soft sound of water and enjoy thinking about the love of nature.



San José Municipal Rose Garden  
Photo credit © <https://montereyfarmgirl.com/2019/06/16/stop-and-smell-the-roses-in-san-jose/>

*“A small act of kindness can have a very large impact on someone else.”*

– Christian Taylor

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## Our Traveling Family Garden

*By J. Smith*

*Dedicated to my mom and dad*

We started around the end of February or early March. We started from the ground up. It was a family that thrived by growing our own nutrition. For many years, we gardened all year round. It got the family outside and into nature and seeing the changing seasons.

We all planted at the same time. We all harvested at the same time. It was a community.

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J. is dedicating her story to her late mother, whose garden was the blossoms of her children.



*(continued)*



© Ariel Skelley/Getty Images

- C** is for common ground and children helping harvest, as well.
- O** is for open-minded gathering and resources.
- M** is for it makes sense to grow our own vegetables to feed our families.
- M** is for the marvelous miracles that we were about to eat.
- U** is for unity within the community.
- N** is for a diverse group of nationalities sharing resources grown in the garden.
- I** is for indigenous communities that bring smiles and laughter. You can just hear us singing our songs in the beautiful sunshine and nature, which brings joy to our hearts.
- T** is for talents and touring other community gardens (like Martial Cottle and Veggielution).
- Y** is for your own individuality, which includes our family garden moving from downtown San José to South San José.

I have gratitude for my long-lasting friends at Sacred Heart Community Services and La Mesa Verde. For 12 years, we were our own family and ate together as a community.

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# Handyman

*By L. Smith*

My father-in-law, John Dumas, owned a combination barber shop and beauty shop in San José. My brother, Paul, and I worked as janitors at his beauty shop. While we worked there, John Dumas told us about a part-time job doing some painting and cleaning. We were excited about the jobs. We even painted a big wall in the house. After we finished the jobs, Mr. Dumas and his son, JD, came over to look at our work. Mr. Dumas liked our work, and he paid us. Everybody was happy!

We started to work on more places and were able to do different kinds of work, like simple repairs. We were glad to get some work in the community. Paul and I became friends with Mr. Dumas' son, JD, and with Avon Patterson, who worked at the shop as a hair stylist. When we weren't working, we would go to the State Fair and have a lot of fun.

We were all glad to have met through John Dumas.

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L. is currently caring for his father-in-law, John Dumas, with his brothers- and sisters-in-law and their loving families.



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## The Garden of Friendship

*By Veronica Suarez O.*



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Veronica likes plants, but she likes making friends more. It is what she enjoys doing the most in La Mesa Verde community.

I am proud to belong to a community of urban gardeners because we grow together, just like plants.

My husband and I love growing plants. In our daughter's school, we found information about La Mesa Verde. They help families grow plants like vegetables, flowers, and fruits.

We meet every month at Sacred Heart Community Center, where we have our gardening workshops and learn how to be urban gardeners. It has been seven years since we joined La Mesa Verde.

Since we joined, we have met many people who like to share the same hobby. We like to have ice breakers when we have new members. The matching game, "Memory Cards", is our favorite way to make new friends and talk about plants. We share everything about plants like supplies, seeds, food, and recipes. When we are worried about rain or pests, we can rely on the community to share our feelings and experiences. We share many tips to help each other's plants grow well. I have learned how to grow things like cucumbers, cilantro, and chiles!



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When we have success growing something, we share these fruits and vegetables with each other. The best part is when we share food that we made at home to share with the others. It's a joyful chance for us to meet!

This community teaches me to love plants, work the soil, and feed the plants with love and patience. In our community, we grow just like the plants from our urban garden.



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Growing cucumbers from seed. Photo credit: sandiegoseedcompany.com



Cilantro and peppers  
Photo credit: seedsforgenerations.com

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## Community Means Education

*By Olga Torgashova*

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Olga is from Russia. She hopes that her story will help popularize programs like Partners in Reading and that her experience can help others.



Photo credit: [www.languagelearningmarket.com](http://www.languagelearningmarket.com)

A community is an educational network. I am convinced that education creates more possibilities; it is the best heritage you can pass on to your children. My son is fifteen years old, and my daughter is two and a half years old. Our community provides high-quality education for both of them, as well as for adults.

My daughter attends a home-style daycare, where she receives fundamental knowledge in English. The team has extensive experience in working with kids from six months to five years old. My daughter is growing up bilingual in Russian and English.

My son is a high school student. He was enrolled in English Language Development (ELD). I see how his English has improved since he started the ELD class three years ago, and I am grateful to his dedicated school teachers. My son has many English-speaking friends now. I am proud of his success because he finished his ELD program earlier than many other students.

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I have a dream of speaking English well. I can learn English at the library, community college, and a local adult school. For people like me who try to start their new career in another country and have families, the help of public programs and volunteers is crucial. The library programs such as Partners in Reading, English Conversation Club, and others are valuable to English learners.

To conclude, I want to say that I am thankful for all the possibilities of studying in the Bay Area for people of different ages. The community makes it possible.



Photo credit: [sjpl.bibliocommons.com](http://sjpl.bibliocommons.com)

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## Reading at My Daughter's School

*By Maria Torrico*



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Maria Torrico is married and has three children. Elizabeth is the youngest. Maria reads at her school in the "Los Dichos" program.

I have helped in my daughter's school reading with a program called "Los Dichos" in Spanish. The mothers read in front of the class in different languages such as Vietnamese, Hindi, Amharic, Spanish, and Portuguese. Even though the languages sound different, children learn. Each language has a particular sound. The children know it is a different language. As mothers, our purpose is to transmit how important it is to read.

The school is multicultural. The children understand. They compare the traditions, customs and lore from different races of people. After reading, we do activities. The children express what they hear by drawing. It is amazing how they can express all their ideas, putting them on paper.

It is nice to work with other parents, learning about different cultures and traditions. We acquire skills. The teacher helps us give a successful presentation. It is an honor to help the school community.

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## My Community is Special Olympics

*By Thomas Valdivia*

My community is Special Olympics. I did Special Olympics when I was young, but as an adult I learned about Special Olympics again from a teacher at Taft College. She saw me running between classes. I had forgotten something and was running to get it. She said, "I need you on my team. We only have nine runners and need ten runners. Would you be interested?"

I said, "Sure, why not?" I tried the 400 race. It was hard at first, but my teacher ran with me, and it got easier.

When I left Taft I asked my mom if I could join Special Olympics in Northern California, because I liked it. So, I signed up. That was seven years ago. I signed up for track and for basketball. My teammates for both are my friends, Stacey, Chris and Shannon. My coach is Coach Melanie.

When I first joined, the coaches didn't know what I did. They tried me out in everything. When I did the 400 race they said, "You're good!" I also brought my other friend Collin, who signed up too. Before COVID we got together every weekend. We trained at

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Thomas wrote this story because Special Olympics is where he finds his community.

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Bellarmino. We had six weeks to get ready for a track meet. The track meets are in different cities. Davis is my favorite. It is nice and hot.

COVID stopped Special Olympics. I still run with my friends but I'm hoping Special Olympics comes back.



*“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us. And the world will live as one.”*

**– John Lennon**

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## Learning With Friends

*By Evelyn W.*

I have found a wonderful community through Partners in Reading in the group classes. I meet every Monday on Zoom for a group class called PAR Explore and Learn with Ms. Georgia. We read and discuss interesting stories about famous women from different parts of the world. I also enjoy the Good News Class with Ms. Kristen on Wednesdays. In this class, we read articles about good things that happen. We learn how to pronounce words correctly and we learn new vocabulary. We also discuss what we think about the story.

When my one-on-one tutor, Kristen, told me about the group classes, at first I wasn't so sure if I wanted to attend. I lost confidence in myself a long time ago, and I thought they might laugh at me because of my English and my pronunciation. She told me to try it one time and see how it was, and if I didn't like it, I wouldn't have to go. But I realized she was leading me in the right direction. So, from the time I joined the class, I liked it because everyone was supportive of each other.

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Evelyn wrote this story because she is proud of herself for learning a lot, and she's thankful for her community at Partners in Reading for helping her learn.

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Ms. Georgia and Ms. Kristen give me a lot of courage. My friends in the class help me a lot, too. We all help each other. I enjoy being with my community. It makes my day every time we meet on Zoom. The days that we cannot meet, I always think to myself, "I wish it were Monday or Wednesday so I could see all my friends." It makes me happy to see my friends from the class. I hope someday we can meet in person. I am thankful my tutor introduced me to the classes. Before I felt lonely being by myself. Now I have a wonderful community to support me.



Photo Credit: © Getty images, Luis Alvarez



## Introduction to Part 2 - “Writing Challenge”

The second part of this book is a little different. Partners in Reading (PAR) asked learners and tutors to participate in a writing challenge. The topic was “What Connects Us,” because it goes along with the theme of *Community* from Part 1. In the last few years, we have been isolated not only because of the pandemic, but also because of violence and divisiveness in the world. To begin healing, it is important to think about similarities instead of differences. We hope that showing our similarities will spread this feeling of connectedness. Thanks to our authors for submitting essays to the Writing Challenge. We hope they are models for everyone to begin reconnecting with a spirit of open-mindedness.

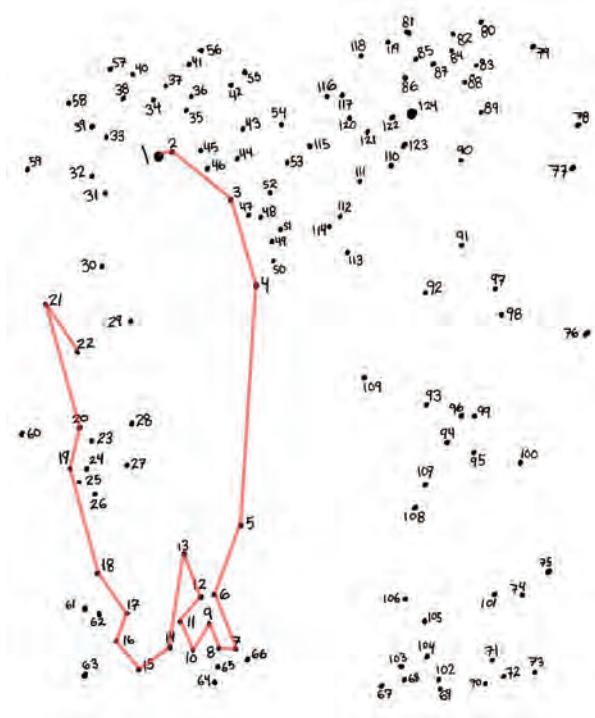
Our judges carefully read each story and found that all the stories were interesting and provided concrete examples of connection. Special recognition goes to Yaneth Padilla in the Intermediate category, to Vaneska Aviles and Veronica Suarez O. in the Advanced category, and to Mary Wall and Beatrice Valdivia in the tutor category.

We also asked our volunteers to write about why they joined PAR. You will find some of their stories here. We hope they will motivate all readers to continue volunteering throughout the community. A volunteer we cannot thank enough is Ellen Hill (see tribute), who dedicated her retirement to volunteering throughout the community. She serves as a model for how giving a little time can make a big difference as we repair the world.

Thank you.



# *Writing Challenge: What Connects Us and Tutor Stories: Why I Volunteer*



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## Smile for a Connection

*By Vaneska Aviles*

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Vaneska likes to meet with her tutor, who supports Vaneska and her family in their learning.



Photo credit: [nationaltoday.com/give-kids-a-smile/](https://nationaltoday.com/give-kids-a-smile/)

A genuine smile can definitely be the beginning of the connection between people. Smiles are contagious and make people feel more comfortable with each other. A smile can help us start a spontaneous conversation with someone. After interacting with the other person, you can decide that he or she will be your friend in the future. A smile also helps to strengthen the existing connection with our families and friends, making the relationship more enjoyable. Accompanying the smile there are other important aspects to achieve a genuine connection with people. We must always show our authentic selves, always being how we really are. We must always be willing to help others to the best of our ability, showing respect towards them. This contributes to stronger and lasting relationships. In short, for me, what connects us to each other is an authentic smile, sincerity, respect and a spirit of service towards others.

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## Tutor Story

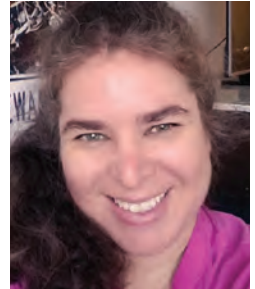
# The Joy of Volunteering

*By Katie Bauman*

I began volunteering to give back to and learn more about my community – to meet people and learn about their different experiences and perspectives.

With the Grateful Garment Project, I process donations, count inventory, and send out orders to agencies that help victims of sexual violence. I don't meet the people who receive our resources, but I know that even a new sweatshirt or bottle of shampoo can mean the world to the person receiving it.

Through Partners in Reading, I started a conversation class for adult learners to build their knowledge and to practice speaking English in a friendly group. My learners say they enjoy the class, but I enjoy it just as much! We learn interesting facts and vocabulary and we talk about happy and tough things in our lives or in the news. We learn from each other and I feel like I've gained new friends through this class.



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Katie was the PAR AmeriCorps volunteer beginning in 2020. She enjoys giving her time and talent to help other people.

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## Tutor Story

# My Town

*By Barbara*



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Barbara wrote this story because it made her stop and think about all the ways her communities connect her to the people and things she cares about.

I live in many communities. My city is San José. My neighborhood is Willow Glen. But my real communities are much smaller.

My family is the most important. We're spread from Carmel to Oregon. It doesn't matter that we don't see each other often, because we keep in touch.

Another community is a women's group I belong to. My group is about 30 women, but it is international. We give grants, loans, and scholarships to deserving women to help them along their path to success.

I enjoy time each month with another group distributing food to people who are having trouble feeding their families.

The Rose Garden in San José brings me joy. There are many volunteers, but I've only met a few. It is my place to go to be outside and alone, making the grounds pretty for visitors to enjoy. Everyone I've met has been friendly and happy to have such a wonderful place to come.

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I feel very useful with PAR. I've had two learners. One now has his own take-out restaurant. The other wants to get her high school diploma. I admire my learners for working so hard in a new country and with a new language. If I have questions or need help, the staff is amazing.

Community can be big or small. It can be many different things and be made up of many different people. I think all my communities make me a better person.



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# Traveling Connects Us

*By Herman Haro*

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Herman wrote this story to describe his experience with traveling around the world and how traveling connects us.



Photo credit:  
<https://pngtree.com/>

Traveling connects us through art, music, food, culture, religion, and story sharing. Art connects us through artifacts by people's memories to share in the future. It also shows what life was like many years ago. We buy souvenirs as a way to grab a memory from that country. Music connects us through the different tones, beats and instruments that tell a story of a person's life and culture. Food connects us by different styles of traditional custom foods, flavors, and textures. Cooking techniques help us try different things and share stories and recipes in the kitchen. Religion connects us by bringing people together to a house of worship. People worship in different styles with different customs and traditions. Story sharing connects everyone by talking about art, music, food, culture, religion, and making new memories for many generations to hear and see. These are the ways traveling connects us.



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## Tutor Story

# High School Graduation

*By Michele Hemeryck*

Last week, I attended my son’s high school graduation. It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon and my family arrived early, knowing there would be a crowd. As I sat in the football field bleachers, I enjoyed watching people arrive for the commencement ceremony. Some wore their Sunday best, marking a very special occasion. Others arrived in their work clothes, looking a little hurried. Many dressed comfortably, knowing the warm weather and list of over 350 names would keep us in the stands for a long while. Folks carried giant photos of their graduate, posters, balloons, flowers, leis made of various materials and occasionally forbidden air horns.

As the students marched onto the field, their royal blue robes contrasted with the somber formality of the black robes worn by the teachers, school and district administrators. Looking at the blue sea of assembled students, I reflected on how these students were part of my son’s everyday life for the past several years. So, too, were the teachers. While a bit more removed, the administrators shaped the

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Michele began tutoring for Partners in Reading earlier this year. She wrote this story to celebrate the class of 2022 and their supporting community.

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experiences of all the attendees. On the field, and in the stands, all of us gathered to celebrate the accomplishment of high school graduation. Each of us, and so many that were not present, worked together over so many years to arrive at this day. For a moment, our community could come together to cheer for these students and each other.



Photo credit: [www/prospect.cuhsd.org/](http://www/prospect.cuhsd.org/)

*“There is immense power when a group of people with similar interests gets together to work toward the same goals.”*

– Idowu Koyenikan

# I'm Glad I Didn't Get What I Signed Up For

*By Tracy Hemmeter*

Reading is one of my favorite things to do. I learn new things, experience strong emotions, see new places, and connect with the world around me when I read. Reading is a gift that I have always treasured and wanted to share with another person. After I retired, I volunteered with Partners in Reading.

The learner I was paired with already had good reading skills when I met her. Our work has focused on writing and conversation skills. The progress she has made is exciting. We can now have conversations about the differences between migrants and refugees, the morals behind Greek myths, and the education system in the country of her birth.

The tutoring experience has been different from what I expected when I first signed up for Partners in Reading, but the happiness I feel from knowing I made a difference is far greater than anything I previously imagined.

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Tracy grew up in San Francisco and has lived in San José since 1989. She is married with two lovely daughters.



Photo credit: [blog.mdpi.com/2018/01/22/mdpi-books/](http://blog.mdpi.com/2018/01/22/mdpi-books/)

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## Tutor Story

# The Pleasure of Volunteering

*By Madelon Leung*

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Madelon is a retired ESL teacher, and she enjoys doing volunteer tutoring.

First of all, I really enjoy getting to know people from different cultures. I'm inspired by their stories of why they brought their families to live here. And it's so fun and interesting for me to hear first-hand stories about their native countries and the way of life there.

Secondly, I like helping people learn. As we work on developing the learners' English skills, they become better able to handle life in the United States. In general, learning English helps people feel more connected, improve their work performance, and find it easier to get the care they need in this country.



Photo credit: PAR ESL  
<https://www.sjpl.org/par-esl>

Lastly, as a retired teacher, I'm grateful to have the opportunity to volunteer at something I love to do. It enables me to continue to be useful and contribute to the lives of other people, which makes me happy.

*“Volunteers don't get paid, not because they're worthless, but because they're priceless.”*

**– Sherry Anderson**

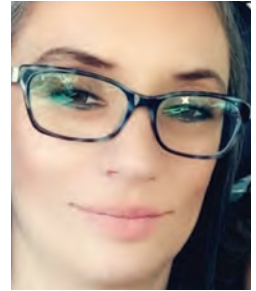
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## What Connects Us?

*By Yaneth*

What connects us? I connect to music rhythm because it gets my attention.

Moving to music or dancing helps me connect to other cultures sometimes the lyrics tell the history of cultures. Dancing to music with another person can make you feel a connection to your feelings and emotions at that moment. When I hear music from my past, it connects me to people and places I remember.



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Yaneth enjoys meeting with her tutor as they learn together.



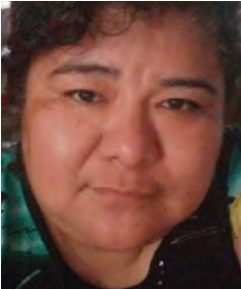
CityDance San José

Photo credit: <https://sjmusart.org/event/first-friday-citydance-november-2021>

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# It's Summer

*By Maribel Reyes*



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Maribel likes summer because she can take vacations with her children. Summer is the best time to have fun outside activities.

Summer brings so much happiness to everyone because it is the best time to get out to have fun times with family, friends, relatives and neighbors and never get bored. The days are long and we can do many things. The nights are short, in fact summer is the most loved season. We can have many activities like picnic, run, walk, play, swim in the pool or river, and visit many beaches around the Bay Area. Summer is the hottest season of the year. I think many people around the world love summer for many fun things.



Cull Canyon Beach.  
Photo credit © <http://themaedaychronicles.com/cull-canyon-lagoon-heaven-in-the-valley/>

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## Tutor Story

# Giving Time, Meeting Wonderful People

*By Sue Rizzi*

Have you ever thought what it would be like if you couldn't read this? We take reading for granted since we've been doing it most of our lives. The adults who come to Partners in Reading want to learn how to read and improve their lives, possibly get a better job, and read to their children.

Through one-on-one tutoring lessons you can help them achieve this goal. Using material supplied by the staff, tutors work with learners as they progress through the lessons. It's a very rewarding experience for both and can be life changing for the learners. I volunteer because it is fun to provide a needed service in my community while meeting interesting people.



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Sue began volunteering during her retirement after working with another group of hard working, caring volunteers at Special Olympics.



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## La Fiesta

*By Veronica Suarez O.*



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Writing is one of Veronica's hobbies because it lets her express her dreams.

Hispanic people love to party in any way. We just connect with ourselves and start celebrating.

For Hispanic people the most important thing is family. We are always connected with love and empathy. When you are a part of a family they will always be there for you.

Hispanic families love and respect traditions, which keep us connected with our ancestors, friends and customs. Through traditions we always remember our friends and loved ones, and it is customary to throw a party in their honor.

Hispanic families develop an unshakable faith in God, who guides us and gives us strength to never give up in the face of any adversity in life. We laugh at our calamities and always seek to be connected with what we love.

Family, traditions and faith keep us connected to a united community that always has a reason to celebrate with a fiesta.



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## Tutor Story

# Are You Listening?

*By Beatrice Valdivia*

Listening is what connects us. Listening to the hopes and dreams of another person gives us a glimpse of what they value and what is important to them. Listening to someone's worries or fears allows us to understand why they might act or react to life events the way they do. Listening to the opinions of people that are different from our own helps us to view the world from different perspectives and, possibly, be more open-minded. Listening to the impact our own actions or inactions have on the environment can help us become more responsible citizens of our Earth. Lastly, listening to our inner selves, or our conscience, helps us to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, and affects how we treat ourselves, others, and the world around us

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Beatrice enjoys volunteering with PAR. It helps her feel connected to her community.



Photo credit: © Getty Images

# Shared Perceptions and Mutual Expectations

*By Mary Wall*

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Mary has volunteered with PAR for 10 years. She has four grandchildren and has been married to Jack for 51 years.

I think what connects us is time and place, what we share and what we expect from each other. What we go through together, good and bad. Big and small events, just having coffee together, or supporting each other during a time of loss. Then there are all the good times, like new babies, and birthday parties. Mostly it's the day by day, remembering to call for no particular reason, just to say hello. Doing the laundry, cooking a favorite dish. Laughing with others is very important, it can get you through a lot. Then there is trust. Can I depend on you, and can you depend on me? Friendship connects us. It's just being there for each other. When a friend calls at 3 am; would I answer? Of course I would.



Photo credit: Photo by Wasa Crispbread on Unsplash

*“Some people think they are in community, but they are only in proximity. True community requires commitment and openness. It is a willingness to extend yourself to encounter and know the other.”*

– David Spangler

# Volunteers Make Things Happen



<https://www.sjpl.org/par>

## PAR Mission

PAR is dedicated to improving the lives of adults by supporting them in basic reading, writing, language, technology, and life skills to engage with greater confidence in all areas of their lives.



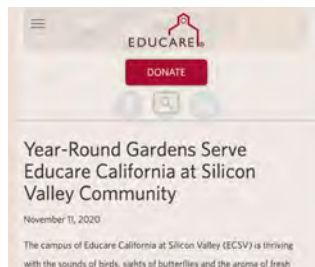
[www.facebook.com/FriendsoftheSanJoseRoseGarden/](http://www.facebook.com/FriendsoftheSanJoseRoseGarden/)  
and [www.friendssjrosegarden.org](http://www.friendssjrosegarden.org)

*“The volunteers were phenomenal, San José really stepped up, and the community obviously valued that garden and didn't want to see it go away.”*

- Tom Carruth,  
Friends of the San José Rose Garden,  
President 2008



Year-Round Gardens Serve Educare California at Silicon Valley Community.  
[www.educareschools.org/schools/california-at-silicon-valley/](http://www.educareschools.org/schools/california-at-silicon-valley/)





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