

# Partners in Reading



San José Public Library | Adult Literacy Program



## Program Highlights Sept 2021—March 2022

- 160 Adult Learners
- 29 Family Literacy Families
- 132 Career Online High School Graduates
- 1194 San José Aspires Students
- 110 PAR Volunteers
- 3,024 Volunteer Hours

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## Who We Are

Partners in Reading (PAR) is dedicated to working with adults to improve their lives by supporting them in basic reading, writing, language, technology, and life skills to engage with greater confidence in needed areas of their lives. By improving their literacy in these areas, PAR believes that adult learners will gain confidence and deepen their engagement in different aspects of their lives. We began our work in San José in 1989, and we use a variety of strategies to help learners achieve their basic literacy goals.

The cornerstone of PAR is our one-on-one tutoring program. This program is staffed by volunteers who meet at least twice a week with their learners. At these meetings, learners decide what they want to learn – such as reading a book, creating a resume, or writing an email to their child's teacher – and the tutor helps them achieve those goals. Some goals are completed quickly, and others may take much longer or need to be broken down into smaller steps. But throughout their tutoring relationship, adult learners bring their own experiences, skills, and interests. The tutors are there to provide a boost to the partnership. As the pairs work to develop skills that are most important to them, PAR keeps services relevant to learners, changing as their needs change.

Over the years, PAR has expanded beyond one-on-one tutoring. We currently offer access to a computer lab and technology assistance, small classes for learners, publish an annual book of learner writings, help adults earn their high school diploma and a career certificate through the Career Online High School (COHS) program, and offer English Language Learning (ELL) instruction to non-native speakers through the library and community partners.

You can learn more about PAR programs by visiting:

[www.sjpl.org/par](http://www.sjpl.org/par)  
[www.sjpl.org/cohs](http://www.sjpl.org/cohs)  
[www.sjpl.org/sjaspires](http://www.sjpl.org/sjaspires)



## PAR Learner: Fitzroy Leslie



**Fitzroy Leslie**

*Chef and owner of Spicy Roy's  
Caribbean Grill*

My name is Fitzroy Leslie and I am a learner from PAR. When I emigrated from Jamaica I couldn't read to help myself. Sometimes I would get lost and I would call my wife to let her know that I was lost. She would ask me what street I was on, but I couldn't read the sign, and it made me feel like I was nothing in this world. I would cry a lot. One day my wife went to the MLK Library and talked with a lady by the name of Catherine about joining the program.

I got signed up with PAR, and they assigned my first and only tutor Ms. Barbara. Ms. Barbara taught me for several years. I learned a lot and accomplished a lot, like getting my driver's license, jobs, reading, citizenship, and even starting my own business. Ms. Barbara never gave up on me. I told her it was difficult, but she told me to believe in myself.

What I enjoy the most at PAR is that they bring darkness to light and don't stop until they get you to read. All you need to do is believe in yourself. Working with the same tutor for several years was really good because I let the embarrassment go and focused on turning my life around. One important thing I learned while being a PAR learner is to believe in myself. Let go of your embarrassment, and you will eventually get there.

My chef journey began in Jamaica. It was not easy, but I was always a fighter. Even though I couldn't read, you couldn't trick me, and you wouldn't know I couldn't read.

When I moved to the United States, I pursued my dream and started doing pop-up catering. One day, one of our friends asked me, "What is your dream

for your catering business?" I told him that my dream was to have my own brick-and-mortar restaurant. He helped me make my dream come true by partnering with me in my business. Now we are co-owners of Spicy Roy's Caribbean Grill. It was always my dream to be a chef, and now I have started my own business.

Check out Spicy Roy's:

<https://www.spicyroysgrill.com/>



***"All you need to do is  
believe in yourself."***

## PAR Tutor: Kristen Vehling



**Kristen Vehling**

*PAR Volunteer, 1-on-1 Tutor and  
Small Class Instructor*

**“Teaching learners  
has become the  
highlight of my week,  
and my life.”**

Meet Kristen Vehling, a dedicated and resourceful Partners in Reading (PAR) tutor. Kristen and her current learner have been working together since 2018 and they've adapted to the challenges of tutoring during a pandemic.

In addition to tutoring her 1-on-1 learner, Kristen leads a popular small class on Zoom. In early July 2021, Kristen started leading the Good News class, where PAR learners read and discuss real news articles, which helps them improve their reading comprehension, vocabulary, and English conversation skills!

Kristen has been an ESL instructor since 1991. She earned her Masters in Linguistics and is used to doing private tutoring and hosting ESL book clubs at her home. During the lockdown, Kristen really missed doing in-person meetings at her home, so she decided to lead a small class on Zoom for PAR learners. Kristen suggests that people who aren't teachers would find the setup flexible and fun. “It's a fun way to get involved with the bigger community at PAR because it's more big picture than the 1-on-1 tutoring. You meet so many different learners and backgrounds and needs and gain a more universal perspective.”

Kristen expresses that one of the best parts about 1-on-1 tutoring is how she became very close with her learner. Kristen's learner has opened up to her and looks to her as a resource and a friend. Little by little, they read challenging books together, fostering a love of reading.

After Kristen gave her learner an iPad and keyboard, her learner was also

able to join the small classes. There was a noticeable change in her confidence as her learner found a positive, online community during the pandemic, which helped reduce her feelings of isolation. This year, her learner will write a story for the PAR learner book, *Community*, which will be available in September.

Two simple resources that Kristen suggests tutors use are flashcards and Quizlet, a website that allows you to customize flashcard quizzes. Learners can improve sight-reading skills and vocabulary in a fun way on their own or with a tutor.

Kristen looks forward to teaching the Good News class each week because the environment in her class is one of camaraderie, not competition. The learners promote positive vibes and people look forward to seeing each other. She really enjoys getting to know the learners and hearing their perspectives, which has opened her world view.

What she finds most impressive is that the learners are so hard-working and resilient. Thinking especially of the individual learners who have jobs and join the class, it inspires her to see someone who is going through a hard time and doesn't use that as an excuse to stop. These adults keep coming to class with a desire to learn, despite their hardships.

Kristen is proud that she can play a part in her learners' successes and provide a positive, online space for this community to make friendships while making reading fun!

## Career Online High School (COHS) Graduate: Eric David Frank

Eric David Frank graduated from COHS in October 2021 with a career certificate in Office Management.

### **Why did you join COHS and choose your career path?**

Even though I went to high school and I thought of myself as reasonably intelligent, I made bad choices years ago and didn't graduate from high school. It has always been gnawing at me. I know that it was a disappointment to my parents and something that I regretted.

One of the many silver linings during the pandemic was that I had nothing to do. One day, I opened the library email and saw the COHS opportunity.

I have worked in an office environment for many years, but not in a managerial position. I'm almost 60 years old with some mobility issues, so when I searched for a new job and considered my experience, I thought office management was the best career option for me.

### **What is one significant thing you have learned during your time as a COHS student?**

I found that it was extremely helpful and motivational to create a tracking system for my time and what coursework I had done. I created a new spreadsheet for every month and color coded the "Start and Stop" time slots for each day that I studied.

Over time, just by looking at the progress that I was making, it motivated me to keep going.

Sometimes, it was also difficult to look at. For example, during the time when my dad was in the hospital, I had some periods when I didn't study. Looking at those blank periods motivated me to work even harder to finish before the 18 months that I was allowed to have.

### **What are your next plans now that you've graduated?**

During my last job, I dreaded going to work every day, and I left feeling empty. I plan to find a good career that I can get some job satisfaction from. After that, I plan to take some college courses.

### **What advice do you have for other COHS students?**

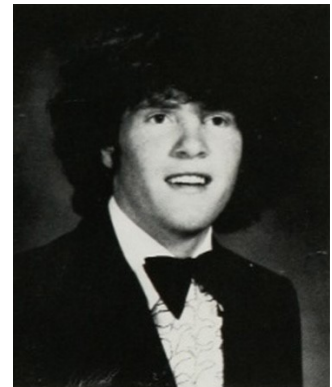
I also highly recommend other COHS students create a tracking system like I did. The other bit of advice I have is that in utilizing the COHS platform, I could copy and paste materials from the screen into a Word document.

I kept very extensive notes and used the highlight function to highlight the areas that I found interesting or were important. Not only was I hearing the information, but I was also reading and taking notes to refer to when I needed to study and prepare for the end-of-semester exams. So take lots of notes and utilize the technology. I even took screenshots of some of the graphics and embedded those into my notes, which made it more immersive.

Finally, don't give up. Things are going to happen in life. Good things happen; bad things happen. I've always thought

about the commitment I made to all the wonderful people who made it possible for me to have the opportunity. I didn't want to let anyone or myself down. I wanted to show my appreciation by completing the coursework and graduating to fulfill my obligations.

**Special Recognition:** Over the course of Eric's time as a COHS student, he put in a total of 672 hours of study time!



Eric David Frank in his high school yearbook photo

2021 COHS Graduate

**careeronline**  
**HIGH SCHOOL**

Find out more about COHS by visiting [www.sjpl.org/cohs](http://www.sjpl.org/cohs)



## What is San José Aspires?

San José Aspires (SJ Aspires) is an invitation-based program for students at select schools in San José. Students in the program will receive financial awards as they complete different tasks connected to college and career readiness. Through the program, students may earn up to \$5,000 to support their post-secondary educational goals.



Find out more about SJ Aspires by visiting [www.sjpl.org/sj-aspires](http://www.sjpl.org/sj-aspires)

## SJ Aspires Student: Noelia

My name is Noelia and I'm a 10<sup>th</sup> grader at Overfelt High School. I am a part of the SJ Aspires program because it is going to help me apply and go to college.

As a participant with SJ Aspires, I'm always learning more about the college process. The program gives me access to mentors who have already been to college and are able to talk about their experiences. I'm glad that I've been in the SJ Aspires program for over a year. It has really helped me out a lot, and I am thankful for that.

If I get my full scholarship, then I will be able to pay for my college tuition and be able to make it through college and graduate with a degree. The money I get from SJ Aspires will allow me to support myself in getting to college and buying all the

materials that I need. It will help pay it forward to my siblings and help them attend college as well.

College makes me nervous because I don't know how difficult the classes will be, and I want to also make sure I take classes that I like. I also know that getting into college is difficult. However, I want to go to college to build a better future for myself and for my siblings, and to make my parents proud. I want to be the first person in my family to attend college and to inspire my siblings.

After college, I want to help serve my community and either have my own daycare center or work at one that's already established. I'm also interested in becoming a police officer to help make my community a safer place.



**Noelia**

*Class of 2024 at Overfelt High School*



## Sponsor Highlight: Ruth Kohan

### **How did you learn about PAR and what about PAR's mission inspired you to support our programming?**

I first learned about PAR when it was established in 1989. I was working as a librarian at SJPL's former Main Library on San Carlos Street at the time, and I heard the very first PAR literacy program coordinator, June Hayashi, speak about the new program. Whenever I ran into her at the library, she would talk up PAR with great enthusiasm, and that made me feel excited about the program, too.

PAR's mission resonated with me because I could see that the program had the potential to impact the community and actually change lives. As a lifelong voracious reader, it was hard for me to believe that so many adults in the U.S., and in our own city of San José, had difficulty reading and writing. When I first heard about PAR, it never occurred to me that I would actually end up working there. In 1991, the position of the PAR literacy program coordinator opened up, and I decided to apply. I was delighted to be selected, and I stayed with PAR until 2004.

### **PAR offers a variety of programs. What program specifically drew you to PAR and how does that connect to your long-term vision for the community of San José?**

While all of PAR's programs are valuable and important, the one-to-one tutoring program is the closest to my heart. At the time I joined the PAR staff, it was the only program offered.

What I like about one-to-one tutoring is that it can be customized to meet the needs of each individual learner, and learners are encouraged to set their own goals. During the time I was with PAR, we added a family literacy program and technology-based learning, both of which built upon the one-to-one tutoring. Small group tutoring, ESL instruction, and Career Online High School were added after I left PAR to become the manager of a library branch at SJPL. Even though I'm now retired, I enjoy keeping up with PAR news and learning about PAR's expansion and new directions.

My long-term literacy vision for the City of San José is that every resident will reach their full literacy potential. A more literate San José will be an even better place to live.

### **You've supported PAR for a number of years. Why are you so committed to PAR's work?**

During my 13 years as PAR's manager, I observed how PAR helped learners improve their lives. They reached goals such as reading to their children, voting for the first time, and writing stories or poems for the PAR books of learner writings. Many also learned basic computer skills and were able to send email and access websites for the first time.

As they acquired new skills, they gained confidence and were able to participate more fully in their communities. This is why I'm committed to PAR's work.

## Support PAR Programs

If you'd like to support PAR and its programs, please support us through the San José Public Library (SJPL) Foundation. Please write "PAR, Partners in Reading" in the "Where to Give" section and select "Other".

SJPL Foundation website: [www.sjplf.org/donate/](http://www.sjplf.org/donate/)



San José Public Library  
Foundation

## Remembering Ellen Hill



**Ellen Hill**

*PAR Volunteer*

Ellen Hill was a dedicated volunteer at Partners In Reading (and other community organizations throughout the City) for over 20 years until her recent death. 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.

Ellen provided one-on-one tutoring to adult learners in San José, built and organized shelving, and maintained the PAR office. She also served as a Gift Giver, helping to distribute books to families in PAR programs. She was Partners in Reading's longest serving volunteer, who began volunteering long before our current staff started working for PAR.

For over 40 years, Ellen was a full-time teacher of special education students in a high-need San José elementary school. After retirement, Ellen spent most of her waking hours volunteering and using her mix of special skills to help others in her community. Ellen joined PAR all those years ago to be a volunteer tutor. She met with

two learners 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. If PAR offered a workshop, Ellen was there to help learners who didn't have a tutor.

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 came in and out of the PAR office to get in the hands of customers. She drew on her vast and lengthy experience managing her classroom to create learning projects for the family literacy packages. Together with volunteer Sue Rizzi, Ellen would create festive table decorations to make the PAR events fun and cheerful.

In summary, Ellen was an amazing volunteer who thrived in her service to others. We miss her very much. She left behind a legacy of kindness, compassion, and empathy. We hope to maintain the thoughtfully organized systems she left in place.

## Upcoming Events

- **April 2022**
  - Volunteer Appreciation Event
  - Climate Change Workshop
  - New Learner Orientation
- **May 2022**
  - Volunteer Orientation and Training
  - Tutor Support Meeting
  - New Learner Orientation
  - Voting Workshop
- **June 2022**
  - New Learner Orientation
- **July 2022**
  - Volunteer Orientation and Training
  - Tutor Support Meeting
  - New Learner Orientation
- **August 2022**
  - New Learner Orientation
- **September 2022**
  - PAR Learner Book Event
  - ESL Classes begin
  - Volunteer Orientation and Training
  - New Learner Orientation

If you are interested in volunteering with PAR or if you could use any of the PAR services, please contact us! If you are contacting us on behalf of a friend or family member, please know that we will need to speak with them directly in order to enroll them in one of our programs.

Event dates are subject to change. Contact PAR staff for more information regarding PAR events.

**(408) 808-2361 | [par.sjpl@sjlibrary.org](mailto:par.sjpl@sjlibrary.org) | [www.sjpl.org/par](http://www.sjpl.org/par)**

**Partners in Reading**  
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**San José, CA 95112**



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**Email: [par.sjpl@sjlibrary.org](mailto:par.sjpl@sjlibrary.org)**  
**Website: [www.sjpl.org/par](http://www.sjpl.org/par)**

**PAR Office Hours**

<b>Monday-Friday</b>	<b>10 am - 6 pm</b>
<b>Saturday</b>	<b>10 am - 1 pm</b>
<b>Sunday</b>	<b>Closed</b>

## Mission

Partners in Reading (PAR) is dedicated to working with adults to improve their lives by supporting them in basic reading, writing, language, technology, and life skills to engage with greater confidence in needed areas of their lives.

## Adult and Family Literacy

Trained volunteer tutors customize individual instruction for adults who read or write below the high school level. Instruction is based on life goals determined by each adult learner.

## Together We Read

A family literacy program that encourages parents to take part in school activities and events, and model storytime to help children practice and build confidence in reading.

## Career Online High School (COHS)

COHS offers scholarships for adults to complete their high school education online and receive a career certificate.

## Manager's Statement



**Adrian McBride**  
**Program Manager**

Hello all. It's been an eventful few months since PAR's last newsletter. In February of 2022, the City of San José lifted restrictions on in-person programming, and PAR has been a flurry of activity since.

As we resume in-person programming, we want to keep the positives that came out of the sudden shift to virtual. For example, PAR staff and volunteers hosted weekly small group classes on Zoom that were enormously popular, and we're working to host ten of those classes each week. We've also recently re-started our in-person tutor orientation and training, so please check our website if you're interested in volunteering.

Career Online High School (COHS) is on track to graduate its 135th student soon, and we have about 140 scholarships remaining to award. The pandemic

highlighted how much commitment it takes to learn online, and we see that commitment in our students.

Finally, SJ Aspires, our microscholarship program, is in its second full year of implementation at Overfelt and San José High School. With schools now open, we visit our partner sites weekly. We're also finishing up a mobile app to further engage students.

I hope you have enjoyed reading these personal stories about people that PAR serves. Supporting individuals as they reach their personal milestones is a central component of the work we do, and I want to thank our staff for their unceasing commitment to the San José community.