

## Two East Contra Costa nonprofits set up libraries at public housing

By Eve Mitchell For the Contra Costa Times

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PITTSBURG -- Six-year-old Jordan Smith beamed as he held up "Jake and the Never Land Pirates: Follow That Sound!" after finding a brand new copy of the book at the children's library at the El Pueblo housing community.

But unlike traditional libraries, where books have to be checked out and returned, Jordan can take up to three books at a time and keep them when he visits the innovative library.

"Can I keep this one? I never had a book before. Yay, I get another one!" Jordan said before selecting two other books to take home as he and other kids flipped through the pages of brightly-colored books.

The books are housed in a cheerfully decorated room at Doris Manly's Favor First Learning Center, a remodeled duplex staffed by volunteers from the Grace Worship Center in Pittsburg.

The El Pueblo library evolved from a partnership that includes Reading Advantage, a Brentwood-based nonprofit, the Housing Authority of Contra Costa County, the county library and its Pittsburg branch, and the Grace Worship Center.

"They love being able to go home with books," said Terris Allen, a volunteer with Grace Worship Center, which also runs after-school and tutoring programs at the learning center that opened in June. "They can start their own personal library. This is something they can keep with them, and pass it down to a little brother or sister as they grow older so there is always a book in the house."

Allen estimates about 40 books have been taken home

In August, a second children's library opened in an administrative office at De Anza Gardens in Bay Point. In addition to free books, both libraries feature story time events put on by volunteers trained by the county

library. Having libraries in public housing communities is a way to reach kids who may not visit a traditional public library, said Catherine Oliver, who works in the county library's Wilross office of early literacy. Lack of transportation or knowledge about what library services are available can be an obstacle, she said.

"Our studies show children from socially and economically disadvantaged areas are not coming into our doors, so we are trying to reach them in their place of residence. That's why we are partnering with Reading Advantage, taking the books into the community and still encouraging use of the (public) library.

"We want to get them used to books, get them excited about books and enjoy reading books,

and hopefully that will inspire a lifetime love of reading books," she said. The El Pueblo and De Anza Gardens children's libraries are supported by grants from the Dow Community Advisory Panel, Los Medanos Community Healthcare District, George Miller Youth Fund, Keller Canyon Mitigation Fund, and the 50 Fund, a philanthropic venture of Super Bowl 50, which will be played next year in Santa Clara. The Wilruss Children's Library Trust donated \$500 worth of books.

David Manly, pastor at Stewart CME Memorial Church in Pittsburg, pitched the idea of having a children's library at El Pueblo to the Housing Authority. He and his brother, Timothy Manly, an associate pastor at Grace Worship Center, grew up there.

The learning center at El Pueblo was named in honor of their mother, Doris Manly, who was very active in the community and worked for the Pittsburg Unified School District for 29 years.

"My wife (Lorraine Manly, a board member of Reading Advantage) and I were talking at the table. She remembered the old days of how the bookmobile used to come into our neighborhood and we could check out books from the bookmobile.

"She came up with the idea of wouldn't it be nice to put a library in El Pueblo. And so out of that, I reached out to the Housing Authority."

Beth Campbell, director of asset management at the Housing Authority, said the libraries at El Pueblo and De Anza Gardens are a first for Contra Costa.

The Housing Authority is looking at expanding the program to other locations, provided funding can be found.

Housing authorities nationwide have been partnering with local libraries to get more books into the hands of kids who live in public housing, she added.

"We want to provide opportunities to our youth in our communities" that go beyond the brick-and-mortar elements of providing housing, she said. "We really are trying to look for partners in our community."

Low-income children tend to have fewer books in their homes than higher-income children, according to Shirley Kalinowski, who cofounded Reading Advantage with Deborah Polk and Sherry Dorfman. "It's really awesome to get the books out to where the kids live and help them develop their own home libraries and love of reading," Kalinowski said.

The launching of libraries in public housing communities is the newest chapter for Reading Advantage. It was formed in April 2014 as a result of community efforts to develop literacy programs that reach low-income families in Contra Costa County.

These include workshops where children's books are given to parents to encourage them to read to their kids, which is a huge factor in improving their ability to succeed in school and in life.

To date, more than 70 workshops have reached more than 900 parents in Contra Costa

County and 9,000 books have been distributed.

Ninety percent of a child's brain is developed before age 6. And being able to read at a proficient level by the third grade is the most important predictor of high school graduation and career success, studies show.

"We want children, especially between the ages of zero and five, to be read to," said Polk.

"It is so important to read between zero and five. "

To find out more programs offered by Reading Advantage go to [www.reading-advantage.org](http://www.reading-advantage.org).