

Anita Rufus of Palm Desert reads "I Can Read With My Eyes Shut," by Dr. Seuss, to students at Cielo Vista Elementary School as part of the Read Across America program. (Marilyn Chung, Desert Sun file photo)



Oh, the stories you'll hear

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For lovers of literacy, literature and the lilting language of Theodor Geisel, Tuesday is a special day.

It's Dr. Seuss' birthday.

March 2 has become more than just a day to remember the late La Jolla resident who brought us such characters as the Cat in the Hat, the Grinch and the Lorax. It's also Read Across America Day, a day when you'll find normally dignified adults wearing floppy red-striped stovepipe hats and telling grade-school children about green eggs and ham.

The idea began in 1997 when a task force of the National Education Association (NEA) suggested a national day of reading. The first Read Across America Day was held in 1998.

Efforts to encourage reading are especially important in the Coachella Valley, where literacy scores lag behind state and national averages.

Dr. Seuss

Theodor Seuss Geisel was born in 1904 in Springfield, Mass. He went to Dartmouth College and earned a doctorate in literature from Oxford University in England — hence the honorific doctor.

In a May 1954 report on illiteracy, Life magazine suggested that children had trouble

reading because their books were boring. This prompted Geisel's publisher to send him a list of 400 words he felt were important for children to learn. Geisel used 220 of the words in "The Cat in the Hat," which became an instant success.

Nobody can call Dr. Seuss books boring.

Readers galore

Most Coachella Valley elementary schools, many libraries and some businesses will participate in Read Across America Day. Guest readers include firefighters, police officers, elected leaders and ordinary citizens.

Desert Hot Springs Mayor Yvonne Parks and Bev Bricker, president of the Palm Springs Teachers Association, will join firefighters at Julius Corsini Elementary for the "Breakfast and a Book" event.

Students will be in their pajamas, a tradition at many schools.

Palm Springs Unified School District Superintendent Lorri McCune and local TV personalities will read at Rancho Mirage Elementary.

Mark Guerrero, son of the famous Latino musician Lalo Guerrero, will perform for 100 third-graders at James Madison Elementary in Indio.

The BookPALS reading group will descend on Ronald Reagan Elementary School and other schools its readers regularly visit.

Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet will read at 10 a.m. Thursday at St. Theresa's School.

The hope is that these visits will spark a lifelong love of reading, which is critical in the early grades. Educators have an expression: Until third grade, they're learning to read. Thereafter, they're reading to learn.

More than just a day

While Read Across America Day is the highlight of the year for reading advocates, significant work to help our children and our schools continues throughout much of the school year.

The Coachella Valley chapter of BookPALS (Performing Artists for Literacy in Schools), a program of the Screen Actors Guild Foundation, has 52 active readers who read to a total of 1,700 students in 63 classrooms.

It is one of 12 chapters across the nation.

Many of the readers are former actors who bring a special flair to the stories, said

coordinator Tere Romero Britton.

“The wonderful thing about the program is that there is a relationship that develops between the readers and the children,” she said.

BookPALS works with teachers to select books that go along with the curriculum. Each reader visits two classes a week for 30 minutes apiece.

BookPALS training

Readers are screened and go through a training period before they visit a classroom using Jim Trelease's “Read-Aloud Handbook,” Britton said. Each reader wears a BookPALS badge.

Trelease nails what we'd like to see happen in the Coachella Valley with this quote: “The only way to improve your reading is by reading. And the more you read, the better you get at it. The better you get at it, the more you like it. And the more you like it, the more you do it, ad infinitum.”

Books galore

On Tuesday, every school that BookPALS normally visits will have readers with Cat in the Hat hats and red bow ties. All of the 1,700 students in the program will get a book and a bookmark, Britton said.

BookPALS share the “Reader's Oath,” by Debra Angstead from the Missouri chapter of the NEA. The first stanza is:

*I promise to read
Each day and each night.
I know it's the key
To growing up right.*

The other way around

Another great ongoing program is “Read with Me” where volunteers from three churches go to three schools in Mecca, Thermal and Oasis. The children read to them.

When Roberta Klein moved to Palm Desert from Northern California six years ago, she wanted to give back to the community. She met with the Desert Community Foundation and learned that education in the east valley was a major challenge.

After meeting with the superintendent of Coachella Valley Unified School District, she worked with Father Howard Lincoln at Saint Francis Catholic Church in Palm Desert to start the program.

Five days a week, about 150 volunteers park their cars in the church parking lot and take a 45-minute bus ride to help students at Mecca Elementary School. They're known as the Mecca Angels.

"The ideal thing is that the teacher can rely on the volunteer," Klein said. "Primarily, we let the children read to them — one-on-one or in a small groups. The volunteers ask questions to make sure they understand what they're reading."

It has paid off. In the last three years, Mecca Elementary has improved 504 to 698 on the API state reading scores. Last year, its 79-point gain was the largest in Riverside County.

More helpers

Another group of Read with Me volunteers based at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in La Quinta carpools to Las Palmitas Elementary School in Thermal.

Scores have climbed 90 points at Las Palmitas in the last few years, Klein said.

A third group based at Palm Desert Community Presbyterian Church started on Jan. 19 to help students at Oasis Elementary School.

Klein hopes another church will step forward to work with Saul Martinez Elementary in Mecca.

More books

In concert with Read Across America Day, Read with Me is delivering 900 books to Mecca Elementary, collected through the Sacred Heart Academy.

"Every child will have one to take home," Klein said.

"This is a a very joyful thing to do."

Other efforts abound

The Boys & Girls Club of the Coachella Valley earlier this year installed computers in the La Quinta Clubhouse to introduce kids from preschool to fifth grade to the Waterford Early Reading Program and the Waterford Early Math and Science Programs.

And for 19 years, members of the Kiwanis Club of Palm Springs have been reading regularly to preschoolers at the Cielo Vista Child Care Center.

Read, read, read

If you want to read on Dr. Seuss' birthday, call the principal at a nearby elementary school.

To join BookPALS, e-mail Britton at Trb1803@aol.com or visit the Web site, www.bookpals.net

To help with Read with Me, e-mail Klein at rnelsonwaker@aol.com

As the Coachella Valley's three public school districts have suffered budget cuts — and face the possibility of further reductions — these programs are more important than ever.

Parents also must take personal responsibility to read to their children regularly. If you can't afford books, go to the library.

Literacy starts with the basics, learning to read by third grade. Without a well-educated work force, the Coachella Valley won't have much of a future.

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