

**Volume II  
Issue 2  
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# LEARN Alive!



## QUOTABLE

The closest we will ever  
come to an orderly  
universe is a good library.

— Ashleigh Brilliant

## Inside

Corporate citizenship is an  
often unheralded element in  
the advancement of literacy in  
America

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Nancy Drew's creator knew  
how to read, and then some

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## Don Defrain wrote the book on pre-LEARN literacy effort

By MARTIN JONES WESTLIN  
Editor/publisher, **LEARN Alive!**

It says here that Libraries Empower All to Read Now (LEARN), the County Library literacy program, was founded in July of 2005 as the County sought to re-establish its own agency for adults who struggle with reading and writing issues. Don Defrain knows better. He predates the current LEARN structure by 14 years — and at 84, he's caught the County's eye accordingly. On May 18, the board of supervisors presented him with an annual award for his volunteer efforts in area literacy, along with about 30 others honored for their work in several disciplines.

Defrain said the need for literacy tutors has remained constant and unfulfilled over the years — but he noted that, unlike today's office-based LEARN structure, the admini-



Don Defrain

(See Defrain on page 2)

## There's good conversation at the ESL Café



Elizabeth Lohr

Literacy volunteer Don Defrain (see story above) wasn't the only game in town on May 18. Well, wait. He *sort of* was, because the other cool event unfolded in Vista while he was snagging his award 50 miles away in San Diego. Just as the County was recognizing his considerable time and effort as an instructor, the ESL Café was setting up shop for what the County Library system hopes will become a mainstay for those seeking instruction in English as a second language.

"We had a bigger turnout than I thought," program coordinator Elizabeth Lohr said of the event. "It was too big for our learning center. We didn't have a lot of room to mill around" amid a cluster of 12 curious bodies. Something's gotta give, Lohr said, before the next meeting, set for 10 a.m. June 15. That's a Friday; at this point, the meetings are held every other.

Lohr said some 40 people are on the Café's sign-up list, requesting tutors. She added that they "are just names we've gotten from different places and walk-ins to the library. We're referring the learners to [the Laubach Literacy Center of San Diego, which specializes in ESL placement].

(See ESL Café on page 2)

# ESL Café *(from page 1)*

ESL Café is founded in a request from Library director José Aponte, who has asked that the system accelerate its dormant efforts to serve the non-English-speaking community.

Meanwhile, there's that totally cool name.

"The library supervisors," Lohr explained, "say 'We want to make the library as comfortable as Barnes & Noble and as fun as Barnes & Noble.' One of the best things in Barnes & Noble is a little Starbucks café, right? Plus, we couldn't just say 'English/Spanish conversation over tea' and all that. We had two Koreans and a woman from Hungary, and we had four Americans come just to sit in and talk and help."

Word of mouth and staff outreach were clearly successful in generating all the interest — but Lohr cautions that the ESL Café is not an end in itself. "I don't want this," she explained, "to be 40 people coming every other week because they don't have a tutor yet.

Our whole focus is to get the tutors to help these people. This is only a pilot program."

Lohr said she seeks the help of retired ESL teachers already conversant with lesson-plan concepts. "Our whole [thrust] right now, is finding tutors to serve these people without taking resources away from [LEARN]."

For now, the response from the non-English-speaking community heralds a strong outlook for the program. And the refreshments — a staple at any self-respecting café — can't hurt.

Santee resident Defrain retired in 1994 from his work as a Navy and Air Force industrial engineer in San Bernardino and at Pt. Loma. Prior to that, he worked in the same capacity for The Dow Chemical Company at its Midland, Mich. headquarters.

In 1998, the County and City literacy efforts merged, only to split anew in 2005. Prior to '98, Defrain said, he performed approximately 130 assessments to gain an idea of the prospective learners' skill bases. "I'd like to do more," he said, "but that's not the way they want it."

But he's undeterred, of course. And by extension, his volunteer spirit is undiminished.

## *Just you wait*

The AmeriCorps midyear literacy conference, a series of informational and tutorial seminars, is scheduled for June 18 and 19 in Sacramento. **LEARN Alive!** will present coverage of the gathering in its July issue, along with an article on Charles Ross, director of the ESL-based Laubach Literacy Center of San Diego.

## QUOTABLE

**Books are the legacies that a great genius leaves to mankind, which are delivered down from generation to generation as presents to the posterity of those who are yet unborn,**

— Joseph Addison

## QUOTABLE

**If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use in reading it at all.**

— Oscar Wilde

# Don Defrain *(from page 1)*

strative duties fell to the volunteers to complete. "We did the [prospective learner] assessments," he explained. "We kept records of the hours and everything else."

But as times have changed, so have the demands on the tutor-learner pool. There is now approximately one LEARN tutor for every four prospective learners — and while that may seem like a formidable ratio, it's all in a day's work for Defrain, who currently serves four students.

"I hate to say that's unusual," Defrain said. "Some may be doing just one or two — it depends on their free time — but I've also taught four students at once before. It's turned out fine, even while I was still working."

## LEARN Alive!

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LEARN Alive!

June 2007

# Literacy and the hidden agenda

## *Corporate giving is vital to a well-read nation*

The Internet is drowning in them. Universities and research institutions publish them as though their livelihoods depend on them (sometimes, they *do*). School administrators shake their heads in dismay over them, the range of motion often more pronounced year after year. Literacy statistics in the United States don't inspire a lot of confidence, and they probably never have. Basic and below-basic performance is the norm in the overwhelming majority of demographic quarters; the upswings are intermittent and sporadic, lost inside the predictions of dire consequences for America's future in the national and international marketplace.

It's a shame, then, that the country's captains of industry are reluctant to thump the commercial tub when it comes to literacy. It's tough to get a handle on statistics surrounding corporate giving in any event — it may be that the companies simply fear the specter of overflow crowds at the door, their smiles of hope looming above a sea of outstretched hands. But a 2006 report by the Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) does its best to draw a bead on this often unexamined topic. The findings, CAAL acknowledges, are by no means definitive. The agency, however, likes to think that the study can provide the incentive for increased dialogue between corporate donors and adult and family literacy leaders.

And amid the formidable negative numbers on literacy in the United States, the news provides a refreshing change.

*The Role of Corporate Giving in Adult Literacy* was conceived in early 2005 with the help Verizon Wireless, the acknowledged corporate leader in the nation's literacy efforts. Both entities, the foreword says, "hoped that an examination of corporate giving and its impact would benefit corporate donors, including Verizon itself, and literacy groups."

**'Compared to many other areas of corporate giving, investments in literacy add up to high-impact philanthropy...'**

The report lists nine leaders that have identified literacy as a priority for corporate giving. The roster includes Dollar General Corporation, the distributor of consumable basics; IBM and Pitney Bowes, the business machine manufacturing giants; the Scripps Howard news service; Starbucks, the worldwide coffee merchant; the Time Warner communications firm; UPS, the package transport group; Verizon; and the Wal-Mart department store chain.

The report notes that the companies are of course required to file their giving records to the Internal Revenue Service, "but their reports usually lack the detail to determine their specific activities." Even so, the study notes, total grant funding by national corporations toward adult and family literacy is "probably on the order of \$30 million." Furthermore, the report says, "Companies also donate an undetermined amount of in-kind support, such as publicity, employee volunteer time and employee matching grants. Corporations that have programs specifically devoted to literacy, and that also support multiple organizations, account for a majority of this giving — on the order of \$20 million. The balance comes from small- to medium-size corporate grants that support one or a small number of literacy groups along with many other worthy causes they choose to support."

The report notes that the firms' hearts are in the right places, both altruistically and corporately. It cites the companies' desires to fuel such programs for the good of the nation and of the communities in which they operate — and of course, that motive may eventually spawn a return for the companies themselves. They, after all, require the best and the brightest as part of their formulas for success; that presumes a labor pool whose literacy acumen exceeds that of the mainstream.

"Compared to many other areas of corporate giving," the report continues, "investments in literacy add up to high-impact philanthropy, both in their benefits to the field and in the goodwill they bring to companies in virtually every community in America." It notes that these benefits take specific forms, with certain firms supporting programs in such areas as health literacy, financial literacy and computer literacy. Significantly, the study states, "It appears that many corporate donors provide more for these and other types of literacy than for programs to increase the basic skills of adults."

That last part reads a little strange. It would seem that in the scheme of things, some firms may be skewing priorities in favor of today's "boutique" marketing strategies. Health and financial and computer literacy are fine, but those areas require a bit of an expertise, one not necessarily attainable without the skills in which the specialty is founded. And the companies' reluctance to release their giving data underscore the questions about the extent of support for such target fields. In any event, it's reassuring to note that corporate philanthropy includes programs to support efforts in literacy. The negative data may be daunting, but in some important quarters, the business environment seems unfazed.

— MJW

**Summer Sleuthing at Your Library: A Reading Program for Adults! and its "Get a Clue" theme has a lot to offer, not the least of which is the presence of Nancy Drew on its promotion materials. Those interested are encouraged to contact their library and to pass the time with this story on Nancy's creator, reprinted by permission of author Martin Jones Westlin from the June 13, 2002 edition of *The Ventura County Reporter*.**

A former *Toledo Times* nightside staff writer sat flush with hurt, mulling public reaction to a rather graphic article she'd just introduced on abortion. The era was the mid-1970s, and *Roe v Wade* was tickling at the public mind in no small measure. Telephonic cries of "Baby killer!" and "Whore!" descended on the young author's leaflike ears, her cheeks no less crimson amid the newsroom's support for her efforts.

Reporter Mildred Wirt Benson, a nice, studious gal whose office conversation rarely ventured outside the professional climate, looked on intently. She offered the odd smile and kind word, then unceremoniously revisited the demands of the clock. She'd seen a bellyful of insults to human harmony since joining the paper in 1944; for her, the abortion flap was just another watershed, predictable fare for a bandwagon of feminist sympathizers at that.

A most distracted cadre they were – unaware that Benson, who died in my hometown of Toledo on May 29 at age 96, had created their modern archetype more than 40 years before the abortion story, to the delight of young women the world over.

Benson's passing spawned a trail of news reports on something widely known in loftier circles – that she was the originator of the Nancy Drew mystery book character. Some of us in the *Times* newsroom were only mildly aware of Benson's connection to the series.

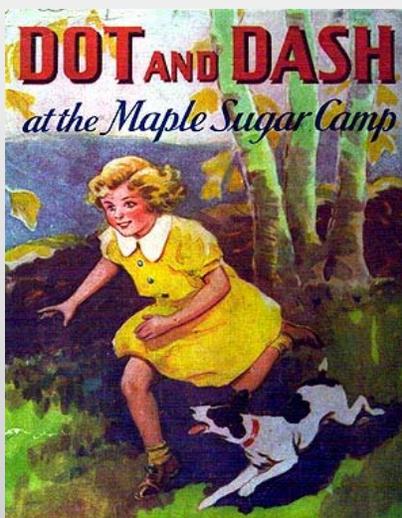
Writers often found a less benevolent climate in the 1930s, when the first of the Drew works (*The Secret of the Old Clock*)

was published. To continue the series, Benson had signed a pledge not to reveal her identity. And by default or design, a litany of authors latched onto the project.

More than 200 Drew mysteries have sold in the millions in 17 languages. Nancy has her own CD and enjoyed runs on TV over

**'I'm so sick of Nancy Drew I could vomit,' she snorted at *The New York Times* during the symposium.**

two generations. But following a 1980 court ruling that allowed her to do so, Benson declared her guiding hand. Under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene, she had written 23 of the first 30 entries.



**Dot and Dash was just one book series for young people from Nancy Drew creator Mildred Wirt Benson.**

And as she observed the fledgling staffer's teary consternation that evening, she may have reflected on Nancy's steely core and a feminism that transcended *The Times'* dowdy city desk (to say nothing of the passing decades).

In Nancy Drew, Benson has a 16-year-old girl whose boundless aspirations were lovingly sanctioned by her well-heeled lawyer dad, even as her daily sleuthing involved beatings, kidnaps, racial epithets extortion attempts, car crashes and tussles with lethal critters (all over items as innocuous as purses and clothes).

Her bravery and grit spoke to a wave of teens hungry for a vicarious challenge. And Benson stretched the envelope herself in kind.

In 1927, she became the first female master's graduate in journalism from the University of Iowa. She got private and commercial pilot's licenses following her authorship of the Ruth Arrow flying stories. She'd made an up-close-and-personal pastime of the study of Mayan ruins. When *The Times* ceased publication in 1975, she worked as a reporter and columnist for *The Toledo Blade* until literally the day of her death. She'd written scores of books, mostly with young people and their dreams in mind.

Nature took its course once Benson's identity became known. In 1993, her Iowa alma mater actually held a Nancy Drew conference to discuss the social impact of the character. But

Benson had grown weary of the scene. The court flap, and ancient requests to spin Nancy into the drub and lesbian scene, had taken their toll.

"I'm so sick of Nancy Drew I could vomit," she snorted at *The New York Times* during the symposium.

But hindsight is often better than 20/20. In this case, it reveals volumes on Benson and the niche she carved amid her past.

For its last few years, *The Toledo Times* was eons ahead of its day. She'd never believe this, but writer Caryl Steinman's abortion pieces would easily fit on the pages of today's most prestigious alternative journals.

Not only that: *The Times* had Nancy Drew on its staff.

The befuddled newbie and the grizzled feminist warrior – what a wondrous publication *The Times* might have been if Caryl and Millie had become a team.