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Extra! Extra! High schoolers help South Bay youngsters with their writing skills



Anthony Lopez, 10, points out his story to Latroyce Talley, 11, as the PressFriends have a publication party at Leland Street Elementary in San Pedro Thursday, December 14, 2017. Student formed nonprofit called PressFriends, where they use their writing skills to help underserved elementary students in schools and community centers, they meet with the students, mentor them and encourage them to find interesting and inspiring stories to write. (Photo by Thomas R. Cordova Daily Breeze/SCNG)

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In an age where most elementary school kids have never picked up a physical newspaper, students at schools in the South Bay are making their own.

And not without help — middle and high-schoolers from the Palos Verdes Peninsula and South Bay come and mentor the kids and help them write articles. They call themselves PressFriends.

“We have students from all different backgrounds. And they’ve all excelled,” said Kathleen Rodriguez, a fourth grade teacher at Leland Street Elementary School in San Pedro. “They pick a topic they want to write about and they love it and they go with it.”

Once a week for four weeks each semester, the students and their teen mentors get together to work on articles. They write about what they learned in school, book and movie reviews, their favorite summer memories and profiles of their peers. At the end of the semester, the students finally get to see their work in the finished product: their school newspaper.

“It kind of lights a little fire for them to create,” Rodriguez said. “To see their published pieces, their name is on that newspaper. It’s like you really are an author, well they really are authors.”

Each school has their own paper. At Leland, kids write for Dragon Tales, and at William Anderson Elementary, the kids are reporters for the Dolphin Times.

Sometimes the kids get to go on field trips and write a story about it afterwards. Recently the PressFriends got to pre-screen “A Diary of a Wimpy Kid” at Fox Studios before it was released — and write a review on it. Another time, they got to tour USC.

“They’re able to see people outside their community and they get to go to places outside their community too,” fourth grade teacher Judy Lee said. “They get so excited and they’re so motivated to write and then they bring it back to our classroom.”

Sometimes they even have a “foreign correspondent” write an article for their paper — usually anyone who has a friend overseas and is willing to contribute.

The program started in 2008 with a handful of students from Miraleste Intermediate School who wanted to share what they learned from working on their school newspaper at Dapplegray Elementary. They started an afterschool program with Roosevelt Elementary School kids in Lawndale and helped publish the Roosevelt Times.

The program is now at seven Title 1 elementary schools during the school year, as well as programs at the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, USC, two public libraries, and the Boys & Girls Club of LA Harbor. Title 1 schools have higher numbers of students from low-income families.

“Coming to Title 1 schools like these and seeing how a lot of these kids don’t have the same privileges that we have, it just makes it all the more reason to come help them create that kind of program,” said Stella Yoo, a senior at Palos Verdes Peninsula High School. “I feel like where I live, a lot of the kids don’t understand that (Model United Nations) and newspaper, debate, robotics, all that – it’s a privilege and not all schools have that.”

PressFriends is mainly centered on helping the younger students become more comfortable with writing. But as a byproduct, the older students learn how to become mentors.

“It’s nice because the teachers are there supporting, but it’s really the mentors that are teaching the kids and taking them through that process,” said Leland Principal Lora Caudill. “The kids blossom from learning from their peers.”

Lee said she’s noticed the program is helping her students be less fearful of writing and making them see it as a less daunting task. And the teachers and principals are not the only ones who have noticed an improvement in their writing skills.

“When I came here, I was really horrible at writing and reading,” fourth grader Celena Mendez said. “... They helped me learn how to write the words correctly and write longer and to read better. So when I went back to class and stuff, I was getting better and better each time.”

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