

# HEALING THE WORLD

## READ WITH ME

BY JULIE HARRIS

It doesn't take long to realize that the Hispanic population in our Coachella Valley keeps many of our major industries running smoothly. Better employment opportunities brought many Hispanic families here for an improved life. But along with this influx of Spanish-speaking people came cultural and language challenges, especially for children attending school who are living in homes where no English is spoken.

Many of our schools were floundering in their attempts to teach English to these children given today's budget and staff constraints. But where there is a need, there is often a person or an organization that comes to the rescue.

### How It Started

Roberta and Clay Klein first heard about the educational needs in our East Valley from their pastor, Father Howard Lincoln of Sacred Heart Church. In 2004, they met with the Coachella Valley Unified School District Superintendent and learned the District had been using English-speaking volunteers, to the extent they could find them, in schools where there



Roberta and Clay Klein, Founders

were no English-speaking people in the community. But the program needed a boost.

The Kleins requested their pastor's assistance in recruiting volunteers, and Father Lincoln readily agreed. The Superintendent offered to provide buses to transport volunteers from cities in the western desert to the East Valley if the Kleins were able to find enough volunteers.

The initial group of volunteers all came from Sacred Heart. A tour of Mecca Elementary School was organized for the first 200 who expressed interest, and from that group came the first 75 volunteers to participate in the program.

### Some Statistics

- Around 98% of Spanish-speaking families in Mecca live at the poverty line and don't speak English at home.
- When Read With Me started here in 2004, the high school graduation rate was 51.1%. In 2016 it had risen to 86.1%.
- At the 4th grade level, children become involved in gangs and drugs, often finally learning to read while incarcerated in prison.

## Read With Me Mission Statement

Our mission is to bring volunteers to schools that serve disadvantaged students to help them develop to their maximum potential.

Our primary effort is to provide English-speaking role models for children who are in need of individual assistance in learning to become fluent in English.

## How It Works

Read With Me tutors are typically retired part-time Coachella Valley residents, some with special skills who help specific students go beyond the basics. They generally work the full school year from September through June.

Before COVID-19, a teacher would assign individual volunteers to selected students to listen to them read, assisting them with pronunciation and comprehension in the classroom.

With the Coronavirus lockdown, everything changed. Now a volunteer picks a day of the week to be available and then registers for a specific elementary school. The school assigns the volunteer to a classroom, where the volunteer joins the teacher's Zoom meeting with students for about two hours per week. The teacher places the volunteer, along with one or two students who need help, into a Zoom breakout room and assigns the instructional materials.

Sometimes the volunteers work one-to-one tutoring a student, and sometimes there is one tutor for two students. Testing shows that students with tutors make 50% more progress. Surprisingly, the one-to-two equation has proven just as successful as working one-to-one because it is even more fun for the students to engage with one another on their assignments.

New volunteers receive a phone orientation and they review various presentations, as well as training videos. Through these orientations, the volunteers learn about different techniques like high-frequency words, phonemic awareness, leveled reading with age-appropriate books, fluency practice, spelling word sorts, or simple alphabet and sound work. The teacher lets each volunteer know which techniques should be used with which student.

Read With Me now provides volunteers from 11 sponsoring churches to 14 different schools. The schools are all in areas of high poverty where most parents are untrained in academic English. They love their children but cannot help them.

## What They Need

When the program started, there were only a very few volunteers at the schools in the East Valley. Last year there were 900. Now, because only remote tutoring is possible during COVID-19, there are 200 tutors. However, the Read With Me staff is hopeful that



schools will be able to open this September. They want to add 700 volunteers when children are back on campus, so they will begin actively recruiting in June. Becoming a volunteer requires a background check and proof of COVID-19 vaccination. The program requires that volunteers live in the Coachella Valley, either part- or full-time.

Read With Me also has a children's book donation program. Because the organization is able to purchase books at a greatly reduced rate, monetary support is more helpful than book donations. The program is looking for opportunities to partner with other organizations to hold fundraisers for purchasing books.

For more information about volunteering, fundraising, or donating, visit their website at [www.readwithmevolunteers.com](http://www.readwithmevolunteers.com), or contact Sherri deBoer, Administrator, at [readwithmesd@gmail.com](mailto:readwithmesd@gmail.com) or 760-567-1830. You can also contact Bob Furring at [rfurring@aol.com](mailto:rfurring@aol.com), who is working with the organization coordinating volunteer recruitment.

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*In the September issue, there will be a short follow-up article highlighting Read With Me volunteer efforts for the 2021-22 school year. I would welcome the opportunity to include a brief testimonial from a resident who is currently volunteering with this organization.*

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