

The Almanac

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ESL students at M-A create a book about themselves

by Jill Youngberg

Many people think of politics and controversy when they think of immigrants settling into new lives in Northern California, but in one class at Menlo-Atherton High School there is an atmosphere of love and support. Kids in the class — newly arrived to the country and new to the English language — are learning to soar.

This room, full of energy, laughter, and lots of nagging, too, is J.J. Lee-Gilbert's ESL II class. The students use a combination of learning methods, from textbook, and reading and writing assignments, to state-of-the-art online programs.

Add to this the hours they spend each week practicing their newly acquired English skills with their tutors and these young people are making visible results. One of the shining projects they did this year using all they've learned is a book all about themselves called "Self-Portraits."

With support from M-A principal Matthew Zito and the M-A PTA, the kids in the class worked for months with their teacher and volunteer tutors to create an amazing book that spotlights each of these students who often don't get recognized in our community.

For them, the creation of this book was a process of self discovery that provided insights into their shortcomings, merits and goals. Their touching true stories are creatively displayed along with posters of their self-portraits, an introductory letter from each student, and his or her photo.

The book holds stories of hardship and happiness, favorite foods and sports, the journey to America, and memories of relatives left behind in Mexico and Central America. The students express their hope for better lives here in California and sorrow for the lives they have given up.

They praise mothers and fathers, grandparents and kind neighbors. Above all, these stories give the reader a glimpse into the lives of young people struggling to succeed in a new land. And every story is written in English.

"When I started working with these kids in September, they could hardly write a complete sentence in English," volunteer tutor Nancy Child says. "Now, their English writing skills are so much better."

The students worked one-on-one with Ms. Gilbert and volunteer tutors, as well as with each other, to write, rewrite, and proofread their stories. Producing the book in electronic form was a painstaking process that took many hours of Ms. Gilbert's personal time.

"The students kept wanting new pictures of themselves," she said. "Finally I had to tell them, 'Enough!'"

Jose Lopez spoke for his class when he said, "I'd like to thank everyone who helped us to create this book — Ms. Gilbert, our tutors and even our parents and guardians who guide our lives so patiently and brought us here to give us a better life in the U.S."

If you would like to know more about the lives, hopes and dreams of some of the newest young members of our community, you can purchase a copy of "Self-Portraits" at the online bookstore blurb.com. If you'd like to make a donation so that each of the student's families may have and treasure the book, contact ESL II tutor Jill Youngberg at jill.youngberg@comcast.net or ESL II teacher JJ. Lee-Gilbert at jgilbert@seq.org.

About the author: Jill Youngberg is a volunteer tutor in the ESL (English as a Second Language) class at Menlo-Atherton High School. This was written in June.

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