

Read for Change

by
Joanne Arnaud

READ for CHANGE is a week-long celebration of reading sponsored by the Boston Adult Literacy Fund. For two years, READ for CHANGE has benefited the adult literacy programs in Greater Boston that are funded by the Boston Adult Literacy Fund. BALF wanted to develop a grass-roots fundraiser that would be fun, easy, effective, and educational. READ for CHANGE fits these criteria and allows students and literacy practitioners to participate at the level that is comfortable for them. READ for CHANGE participants raise money for each hour they read. All reading, in any language, counts—novels, ads in the T, web pages, children’s homework, newspapers. We reward the hours spent reading instead of the total pages or number of books read so readers at all levels can feel free to participate. Participants ask people to sponsor them by pledging a certain amount per hour for each hour they read.

Each participating adult literacy program is given forms and student hand-outs explaining the mechanisms of READ for CHANGE. We give them pledge sheets that contain information specific to their program so that each request for support is also an act of educating the public about the program. The programs keep all the money that they raise. BALF only asks them to let us know how much they raise, how many students partici-

pate, and the name of the student who raises the most money. Local bookstores donate \$25 gift certificates to BALF to be awarded to the student winners.

Many adult literacy students tell us that they want to give something back to their programs, but they have small incomes and many responsibilities. READ for CHANGE allows them to help their programs by asking their friends, relatives, co-workers, and families to pledge, even small amounts. One woman asked her fellow parishioners to sponsor her with a dollar. She told her program director that standing up to ask was a very big step for her and one that increased her self-confidence when almost all of the people she asked agreed to sponsor her.

When we began to plan, we realized that students from other cultures might be unfamiliar with the concept of “thons.” Since we also wanted to make the procedures simple and comprehensible to all adult learners, we asked several ESL and beginning reading teachers to review the hand-outs to make sure that our language was appropriate and our meaning was clear.

Appreciating how incredibly overworked program staff are, the last thing we wanted to do was to impose another burden on them. Participation is purely voluntary. Programs that do take part have found it to be worthwhile. It brings together their staff, students, neighbors, and volunteers in an activity that is rooted in the common endeavor of reading.

One benefit from READ for CHANGE has been the learning projects that have been created around it. Several classes use READ for CHANGE as part of math lessons involving decimals, multiplication and word problems. Students in another program created a huge poster where they tracked the number of hours they read that week, including the hours of those who did not wish to find sponsors. Some of their children were so enthralled by

their mothers’ charts that they asked to have their reading included in the calculations.

BALF also holds its own READ for CHANGE by enlisting the support of our donors and friends. We are reaching out to new supporters; some book clubs have become involved, and we hope to encourage companies to participate as sponsors of programs’ efforts or

as participating teams of readers. We are beginning to reach out to middle and high school students as well.

In the last two years our collective efforts have raised over \$12,000, increased awareness about adult literacy, and developed a new respect for how indispensable reading is for us all. BALF plans to make this an annual fundraising event. After all, where else can you raise money for a good cause just by curling up on the couch with a good book? Please call us at 617-720-0181 if you are interested in participating or would like to help us make next fall’s READ for CHANGE more exciting and successful. •

Many adult literacy students tell us that they want to give something back to their programs, but that have small incomes and many responsibilities.