

Creating Literacy Fairs

How Collaboration Helps Early Literacy Goals

JANINA GOODWIN

Early literacy, outreach, and community partnerships are three constant initiatives of many public libraries. And the Youth Services department of the Pueblo City-County (CO) Library District (PCCLD) is no exception.

A few years ago, PCCLD hired an early literacy librarian to focus on early child development and pre-literacy skills, in the hopes of helping the district achieve such goals. This librarian identified a need, conveying the message that early literacy is a daily activity that can naturally and easily fit into a family's life. She then worked with the Youth Services team to develop a Literacy Fair at PCCLD, beginning a very active and fruitful partnership with the Junior League (JL) of Pueblo.

While the librarian who began this program no longer works for PCCLD, the literacy fairs continue each year with new activities and new eager participants. The budget for such a program has always been minimal, and in 2015 it is estimated to cost no more than \$500; that varies greatly due to reusable supplies. Purchases have included one-time items that many libraries may already have such as an easel, water/sensory table, blocks, as well as consumable supplies such as Play-Doh and markers. The first year, the Literacy Fair was held at our largest location, Rawlings Public Library. Currently, events are being held annually at each location.

Literacy Fairs

At the Literacy Fair, families can explore "stations" together, trying activities that are easy to replicate at home. The goal is to educate parents about the Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) I early literacy skills of print motivation, print awareness, letter knowledge,

vocabulary, phonological awareness, and narrative skills. These skills are developed through the five identified ECRR II practices of reading, writing, talking, singing, and playing.

At these stations, parents learn about and experience the ease and importance of these literacy-rich activities. As we know, a parent might feel overwhelmed by early literacy terms and definitions, but the Literacy Fair demonstrates fun activities that parents can easily replicate, making early literacy an accessible concept.

Previous early literacy fairs have included such activities as:

- **Making finger puppets.** Creating and playing with finger puppets encourages communication and storytelling, which improves narrative skills and vocabulary.
- **Creating pasta necklaces.** The act of stringing beads or pasta helps with fine motor skills critical for writing and also enhances sequencing, patterns, and hand-eye coordination.
- **Playing in sensory bins.** Colorful shredded paper is available for digging and playing with utensils, hunting for items



Janina Goodwin is Rawlings Library Manager at the Pueblo City-County (CO) Library District.

(toys, letter blocks, etc.), an activity that improves motor skills, vocabulary, and letter awareness.

- **Enjoying a music station.** Shaker making supplies, scarves, neckties, and streamers are available for play to accompany background music. This activity helps children hear sounds, slow down their speech, and just have a fun bonding time with their adults.
- **Playing a rhyming game.** Matching rhyming pictures or items helps improve phonological skills and vocabulary. This activity station provides ideas for parents to easily adapt this concept while grocery shopping, driving, or just in their daily lives at home.

Signs, posters, brochures, and other guiding documents are available at each station to engage parents and children, but the most effective way of passing along information about literacy-rich activities is talking.

Because the Literacy Fair could have become a labor-intensive program, requiring the entire Youth Services department, we reached out to the Pueblo's JL.

Junior League of Pueblo

The JL mission and vision aligned perfectly with the library's goals. The JL is an organization of women committed to promoting voluntarism, developing the potential of women, and improving the community through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. Its purpose is exclusively educational and charitable.

The JL of Pueblo is a recognized leader in the community, committed to fulfilling the need of the child. Volunteers nurture the individual, advocate for the rights of the child, and strive to empower the children of Pueblo to reach their full potential.

Through the spirit of voluntarism, community improvement, and fulfilling the needs of children, JL provided twenty volunteers for our first Literacy Fair in 2012. They provided at least two volunteers per station, plus additional volunteers to be present for the duration of the event. Additionally, JL donated a book for every child who attended the event. They brought a variety of books on multiple reading levels so every child, including younger and older siblings, could select a book to take home.

JL's partnership with PCCLD for this first Literacy Fair laid the groundwork for future projects. In 2013 and 2014, JL supported Literacy Fairs at four PCCLD locations with several volunteers and a free book for every child. And at each Literacy Fair, the JL volunteers have learned the details of their station and passed along the information to parents and families, enthusiastically encouraging them to participate in the activities and learn fun and simple ways to prepare the children's brains for reading.

Due to the addition of three new libraries to the PCCLD system, the schedule for the Literacy Fairs was too challenging on staff schedules and had to be adjusted. Instead of concentrating the events into one month, as was the original schedule, we now provide them over several months. Unfortunately, along with this change, JL has not continued with this partnership. PCCLD hopes to find a way, again, to work with JL on future Literacy Fairs.

Partnering for Pueblo's Youth

This relationship is not only about the Literacy Fairs. JL provides several child-focused events throughout the year and has invited the library to participate to promote the library and its literacy initiatives.

Every January, JL hosts Kids in the Kitchen, an event focused on healthy habits. PCCLD hosts a booth to promote the library as a resource for learning about healthy cooking, exercise, and, of course, to promote the idea that exploration of books and information is a healthy activity.

In the spring, JL provides Fit for Fun in the Pueblo Mall, where kids can try Zumba, jump rope, hula hooping, and other physical activities. Again, the library is provided a booth to promote the library as a resource.

In 2014, JL hosted Touch a Truck, an event where kids explore large vehicles, and more than four thousand people attended. PCCLD provided a large literacy station at the event. JL partnered with other local service clubs to provide free books to every child who attended, and the library provided more books, play opportunities, and several literacy-rich activities.

Additionally, the library brought small cars/trucks, building blocks, cardboard tubes, ramps, and fun supplies to create courses for "driving."

This was an ideal opportunity to promote the library as a place for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) learning, where children in the community can explore ideas behind mapping, engineering, building, and various principles of speed and gravity.

Partnering for the Future

PCCLD has found an excellent friendship with the JL of Pueblo. These women enthusiastically interact with children and families as they live their mission and vision and help the library accomplish its own goals of reaching as many people as possible in the community, conveying the messages of early literacy and library use. 🌱