

¡Bienvenidos! Cuentos en el Parque: Taking Library and Other Community Services on Location

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During the middle of the summer in Sherwood, Oregon, if you are walking through the grounds of one of the largest parks in town, you will see tables set up for lunch for a crowd, other tables with free books and community information, bubbles filling the air, and about 100 kids and their grown-ups enjoying a camp-like experience. You will see families of all demographics enjoying stories and songs in Spanish and English. You will see happy faces lined up for lunch, and a riotous enthusiasm that only kids exude during a fun craft or outdoor game activity. You might wonder what is going on. Is it a school gathering? Is it a city event? Is it a community fair? The answer is all of the above. It's Bilingual Storytime in the Park/Hora de cuentos en el parque, an annual storytime session that runs once a week for six weeks during the summer, now in its fourth year.

Bilingual Storytime in the Park is an outreach program run by Sherwood Public Library, Sherwood School District's Sherwood Helping All Reach Excellence (S.H.A.R.E.) Center, and Sherwood YMCA. Community partners also include Helping Hands, Mud-Puddles Toys and Books, Sherwood Center for the Arts, Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge, and the City of Sherwood, all of which come together to reach Spanish-speaking families. This article will describe how our library partnered with other city organizations to create a successful outreach program for families and how you can do the same.

How It Began

The idea for the program began in early 2016 at a meeting with representatives from Sherwood YMCA, Sherwood School District (SSD), and Sherwood Public Library. David Parker, then YMCA Teen Center and Youth Sports Director, was looking for ways to increase attendance at their summer Hop the Gap program, a prevention program for grade-school kids. Beccah Wagner, then SSD Early Learning Resource Manager, and I, were looking for





Whether in Spanish or English, everyone listens attentively.

ways to work together to reach Sherwood's underserved population. We had tried other outreach programs to reach our Spanish-speaking population without much luck. The question at the table for all of us was this: Could we create a program together that would offer the strengths in services we each had without expending any funds other than our time? All of us had tight budget restrictions. Judging by our mission and vision statements and our strong desire to build and strengthen community ties, the answer was yes! From that meeting, Bilingual Storytime in the Park was born. Though partnerships and budgets have evolved over the years, our original vision remains the same.

We knew our project was a huge undertaking and each of us needed to take on a major piece of the event. After that original meeting, with six months lead time, each of us listed what we could bring to the event, much like how a potluck works. Instead of bringing food, we were bringing services. I brought the storytime expertise and volunteers to help out at the event, secured the city park and rain/sun canopies, and created the promotional pieces for the event. David brought his physical fitness expertise. Each week he got the kids moving with activities that worked their gross motor skills. He also contacted a local tutoring business to bring brain-game activities. Beccah brought strong community networking expertise. She contacted Helping Hands, a local food bank, to provide a free sack lunch for attendees. She contacted local businesses to find out which ones would be interested in participating in a camp-like community services program. Thanks to a grant generously provided through Early Learning Washington County, she also brought free books in English and Spanish. All of us brought our respective resources to the event: flyers, event calendars, free books for kids, and anything else that would promote the services we offer to our community.

Planning, Adjusting, Evolving

For our program to succeed, bilingual skills were a must. The only trouble was, none of us had Spanish language skills. Undeterred, we looked for creative solutions. In our first





Making a craft together builds community.

community, centrally located, and within walking distance for our target population. Though we have many parks in Sherwood, we chose Stella Olsen Memorial Park because it had a bathroom and it was in a central location to our target audience. To determine the best location when planning your event, ask your team what is most important about the venue. How will location impact attendance? Does it need to have a bathroom? Parking? Does it need to be on a flat space or could the space be hilly? Though Stella Olsen Memorial Park isn't perfect (the bathroom is up a steep hill and parking is across the street), it does satisfy most of the needs on our list.

year, we were able to ask another S.H.A.R.E. Center staff member, Maria Quinones, to step in and help with storytime. In the second year, we recruited Spanish-speaking student volunteers from the high school to facilitate the Spanish portion of the storytime. The third year we relied on a combination of high school student volunteers and bilingual Latter-day Saints (LDS) missionary volunteers. This year, we began a new level of commitment. We contracted with a bilingual storytime presenter, Sunny Yopez, to create a more seamless experience for attendees. This new enhancement has been our only major budget expense so far.

In the beginning stages of planning, we needed to determine where our event would take place. We wanted to be out in the com-



If your library wants to create a similar program with several partners, don't be afraid to cold-call potential community partners by phone or email. Once your community partners have been found, set up an in-person meeting with the key communicators from those organizations. Provide them with a clear idea of what your goals are for your program and ask if they are interested in reaching a similar goal. Develop objectives as a team and divide the work up equally among the group.





Shaking the parachute together helps build coordination and teamwork.

The planning phase is a good time to decide what elements will be most effective for the event. Is a storytime what your community needs, or would a grade-school aged STEM activity draw attendees? Could you do both? Do you need to serve lunch for the program to fulfill your goals? If you determine that an outdoor activity is important, but you don't have a local YMCA, what local fitness agencies do you have that could bring the same healthy living message? You might have a local Taekwondo business or dance studio that would be willing to donate their time to your event. In addition to a YMCA, Sherwood is lucky enough to have its own locally owned toy store, Center for the Arts, and a National Wildlife Refuge; all have been dedicated partners to Bilingual Storytime in the Park by providing a weekly craft at the program. Above all, you will want to reach out to a variety of community partners.

Our team was able to create, plan and execute the program on a six-month timeline. If your first step is to find partners, you might need three to six months to contact and make connections with other organizations. If you are starting from the beginning, brainstorm community partners who have a similar mission and vision. One final detail to consider is to create a partnership agreement. While we did not use a partnership agreement for the first four years of our program, we now have one and will use it going forward. The partnership agreement will ensure all partners know their responsibilities and will make planning easier.

Impact and Assessment

To understand our impact better, we provided paper surveys in English and Spanish to attendees in the final week. We asked attendees questions such as "How did you hear about the event?" and "What did you and your child learn at this program?" and more. People show





Options for recruiting Spanish-speaking volunteers for your program might include reaching out to your agency's volunteer coordinator, a local high school's Spanish-language instructors for student volunteers, and your library's teen volunteer club. Another recruitment opportunity might reside in community colleges with strong ties with the Latinx/Spanish-speaking community. Additionally, LDS missionaries in your area might also be bilingual and looking for volunteer hours.

up year-after-year, community partners have continued to partner with us, and the number of Spanish-speaking families in attendance has grown. When we began in 2016, 10 percent of our attendees were Spanish-speaking. In our fourth year, 30 percent of our attendees are Spanish-speaking. Families tell us Bilingual Storytime has helped them connect with community resources they didn't know existed and has been a place to strengthen community ties.

The event has become a place to shrink the equity gap. Our local food pantry, Helping Hands, serves a sack lunch to every participant. This means we can normalize a meal. Lunch is for everyone, not just for families experiencing food scarcity. This has strengthened camaraderie among attendees. We have also normalized the idea that there are families in Sherwood whose first language isn't English. We are celebrating the idea that learning a few words in another language, whether in English or Spanish, can be a way to build community.

Bilingual Storytime in the Park will continue to evolve. We know we will have setbacks, changes and improvements as the years go by, but our commitment to bringing this event to our community will endure. Our three organizations united to create a meaningful experience for our community. If we can do it, you can too! 🐾

