

Literacy program expands

By Cynthia Moreno / *Vida en el Valle*

FRESNO -- What started out with one man's vision to get more children to read in his neighborhood, has bloomed into one of the country's most successful early childhood literacy programs.

Today, Reading and Beyond has prepared children to enter kindergarten by giving them the tools they need to succeed developmentally, academically and socially.

But recent city budget cuts almost forced the non-profit organization to shut its doors. Last Tuesday, help arrived in the form of a partnership with the city that will allow Reading and Beyond to continue.

"This is part of a greater vision we have for the students who are the future of this country. Studies have shown that a student's success is contingent upon the services that are available to them beyond their school and our new site will continue to offer more opportunities for them and their families," said executive director Luis Santana at a ribbon-cutting ceremony last week.



Dignitaries playfully look for direction before the ribbon cutting symbolizing the start of a partnership between Reading and Beyond program and the City of Fresno at the Mosqueda Center on Oct. 25, 2011. Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingen, Executive Director for Reading and Beyond Luis Santana, and Fresno City Councilmember, District 5, Sal Quintero were among the dignitaries.

Starting this week, Reading and Beyond will house its core operations at the Mosqueda Community Center in southeast Fresno.

The center currently offers a place where families, children and students can go for recreational activities.

It boasts baseball and softball fields, basketball courts, a children's play area, computer lab, social hall, swimming pool, picnic tables and barbecue pits.

The center also offers programs where community volunteers help serve hot meals to senior citizens for a small donation. Families can take advantage of the ceramics courses, fitness and aerobics classes such as martial arts and dance classes that are offered.

"We hope this new partnership and the center will become a one-stop shop for all of the families we assist," said María Ceballos, community connection coordinator for Reading and Beyond.

"Parents will be able to come to this place, drop off their children for tutoring and still be able to walk around and have access to other social services that are provided by the center. We know that families will be able to better access all the resources they need in one place." said Ceballos.

In the beginning, the partnership didn't seem likely because of Fresno city budget cuts.

"It was very important to us to protect the services Reading and Beyond offers. The Mosqueda Center is a prime example of a place that can really stretch the dollar and still provide quality services to the public," said Mayor Ashley Swearingin.

City Councilmember Sal Quintero, who represents southeast Fresno, called the partnership "a day of re-invention."

"This is the type of program that is giving parents and their children the right tools to move forward and become self-sufficient and self-reliant," he said.

"We are living in new times. There are less and less resources in our communities but the needs continue to grow and our goal is to leverage our resources to keep helping families in these difficult times," said Santana.

Reading and Beyond surveyed 100 Latino parents asking them if they knew what ELL (English-language learners) stood for and if they knew their kids were in those classes. Only 3 percent said they knew their children were in ELL classes. The percentage is smaller in rural areas.

"These are kids that are born in this country, not elsewhere," said Ceballos.

To keep students on the right track, parents are taught how to become advocates. Ceballos estimates more than 350 parents a year complete more than three ELL advocacy workshops.

"We don't want the system choosing for them. We want to help children grow up academically successful so they can attend a college of their choice. We don't want them to fall behind; we want their success and that means, they should be taking the right preparation to get to the college of their dreams," said Ceballos.