

Born to Read



History of *Born to Read**

Born to Read began as a part of the San Antonio Public Library's 100th birthday celebration in 2003. The intent was simply to give a "birthday gift" to every baby born during the Library's centennial year. The gift bag consisted of a durable book bag filled with two bilingual books, information about the Library and an application for a library card. Distribution was accomplished by recruiting the help of local hospitals through board members. The Library Foundation gave away 25,000 bags, had First Lady Laura Bush read to a group of children at the Central Library, and then we ended the year by inviting all of the centennial *Born to Read* babies to come have a picture taken at the Library for our archival records. We were overwhelmed with the response; parents, siblings and grandparents brought their centennial baby polished and dressed in their finest for the picture. By this time, the Library Foundation had decided to continue the program for a second year.

By trimming costs, using volunteers from the Library Foundation's Board of Directors to deliver the books to the local hospitals and promoting the program within the hospital nursery staffs, another 25,000 bags were given away in 2004. We also began to get feedback from the community as to the popularity of the free books. The red canvas bags with their *Born to Read* logo could be seen in malls, at bus stops and with every other daily family activity. They soon became a symbol of the library and reading. In 2005, the *Born to Read* initiative joined with another of the library's early reading programs, *Little Read Wagon*, which visits daycare facilities to train teachers and child care workers about how to set up reading centers and how to read to children. *Little Read Wagon* provides free books for facilities and was able to survey parents to determine if they had received the *Born to Read* Literacy Kit.

In 2005, a major donor to the Library Foundation attended a workshop by James Heckman (The Technology of Forming Human Skills and the Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children) and related the research-based conclusions drawn by Dr. Heckman to the *Born to Read* effort. Through this donor's support the *Born to Read* project was funded for 2007 and 2008.

In 2006, the *Born to Read* program was recognized by the Institute of Museum and Library Services with its National Award for Museum and Library Service. *Born to Read*

has impacted children's lives in Bexar County and we see the potential for the program to serve as a model for other libraries. The need certainly exists—the illiteracy level in San Antonio is 25% (12.5 % illiteracy + 12.5% functionally illiterate) - City of San Antonio Department of Community Initiatives Family Resource Center. It has been said that San Antonio's demographics today (especially those regarding poverty levels and ethnic makeup) are representative of how many large metropolitan cities will look in 2040. To address San Antonio and Texas' literacy needs, we are developing *Born to Read* as a model program and considering strategies to reach other U.S. cities. In fact, as part of the 2008 *Born to Read* initiative, we completed the music/sound design and recording of 60-second radio spots encouraging parents to read to their children and created *Born To Read* posters that blanket San Antonio's corner stores. We also completed two animated public-service spots (one bilingual) and will begin work on two live actions spots as soon as funds are secured.

It had always been the San Antonio Public Library Foundation's dream to include a marketing campaign as part of the Born to Read distribution of book bags. Until 2007 when we received a generous challenge grant and completed the matching grants, we had never been "far enough ahead of the curve" to have any extra dollars to use for marketing efforts. With enough funds in hand to be certain we could purchase books and bags, we pursued in-kind contributions for writing and producing radio and TV spots. We were very lucky to find talented professionals both in San Antonio and Los Angeles willing to donate their time and talents to this worthwhile project. Many volunteer hours and \$15,000 in hard costs later, we now own the rights to these spots and are not only working to have them air in our market but are making them available to other cities as well.

(*American Library Association initiative focusing on early reading)