

October 2006

Getting a good read on Fresno volunteers

Sometimes we need a reminder about the positive difference people can make in their community. Two examples are the Fresno Covenant Foundation and ReadFresno, both of which help young students read



**BILL
MCEWEN**

better.

The groups are on a roll. They recently received grants and are eager to expand their reach. But they need something else — more volunteers.

If you're lacking inspiration, the story of Fresno Covenant's book drive should do the trick. Fresno Covenant's Jenny Brietigam met Liesl Garner at a Fresno County Women's Chamber of Commerce meeting last year and hatched the idea of giving books to students in the foundation's after-school reading programs.

The result: 7,000 new and gently used books, about 4,800 of which were donated by students and faculty at Mickey Cox Elementary School.

"We have books coming out of our ears right now," Brietigam says.

There's more good news. Impressed by the May book drive and the foundation's success with below-grade-level readers, Citifinancial, the lending arm of banking giant Citigroup, awarded a \$20,000 grant to Fresno Covenant.

"We were involved in the book drive, which fit into our theme of educating for the future," says John Amodei, district manager for Citifinancial. "We look for nonprofits that tie in with our beliefs and values."

foundation has about 90 tutors working with 500 students.

"Our goal is to be at 180 volunteers so that we have as many kids as possible receiving one-on-one tutoring," Brietigam says.

ReadFresno hit the jackpot by collecting 3,000 books in its August drive and receiving a \$100,000 grant from the Fresno Regional Foundation. That money, too, will be used to recruit volunteers. ReadFresno is at eight school sites and is adding six. It eventually wants to target children in Fresno County's 50 lowest-performing elementary schools.

"Our whole goal is volunteer outreach," says ReadFresno director Kristine Walter. "I get calls every week from schools saying, 'Please bring your program.' The need is great."

Fresno Unified test scores point to the need. Though the district is making progress under Superintendent Michael Hanson, only 29.5% of its students in grades 2-6 are proficient readers.

Walter says the programs are about more than improving student comprehension, vocabulary and pronunciation: "Many of these kids need someone to care about them. The interaction is really important."

Though I've never volunteered with these groups, I was a volunteer reading and homework tutor at Kirk Elementary for several years. Kirk reflects the reality at many Fresno Unified schools in that test scores are up significantly, but still not where they need to be.

If you're thinking about becoming a reader or tutor, know this: The students are a delight, and you'll get more from the experience than you put in. Most of all, volunteering takes you off the sidelines and into the effort to strengthen local schools.

► Details are available from Fresno Covenant Foundation at (559) 226-4672 and ReadFresno at (559) 443-7323. The columnist can be reached at bmcewen@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6632.