

## **Nonprofit shows how Genesis could have done it**

By Bill McEwen

After months of following the latest and, hopefully, the last Genesis Family Center scandal, I need to be cleansed of nonprofit CEOs driving BMWs, hiring boyfriends and operating out of high-end offices -- when not in jail.

So I head to Butler and Chestnut avenues. This is where Reading and Beyond -- flanked by a sandwich shop and a liquor store -- has its headquarters.

The storefront is a patch of heaven for Luis Santana, who started the nonprofit 10 years ago with \$20,000 in seed money and a goal of providing underprivileged kids with educational tools to succeed in life.

"We have all the room we need, and we're in the community we serve," Santana says of the modest space.

Santana, 52, can squeeze 11 cents from a dime.

He has worked with street children in his native Brazil and Colombia. After quitting his job as director of a small hospital in Brazil, he worked in the campus cafeteria and slept on friends' couches while earning a master's degree in social work at California State University, Sacramento.

Santana hands me Reading and Beyond's 24-page, full-color annual report for 2008 and brags that Jenny Brietigam, after-school program manager and publicist, produced the brochure herself, using software worth just \$300. An anonymous donor had the report printed.

At Genesis, \$300 didn't even pay for a month's lease on Elaine Bernard's Beemer. Santana says that nonprofits are obligated to be tight with their money: "One, it's essential to having a sustainable program. Two, we can help more families. Three, my board demands it."

Despite its modest beginning and humble headquarters, Reading and Beyond is flourishing. A decade ago, it helped 30 children to read. Now, it provides early childhood education, health education, the Upward Bound college-preparation program at Central High School and an adult college prep program.

In all, it tutors about 600 students a day at 16 locations in Fresno County. Testing by the nonprofit indicates that 70% of children enrolled for at least six months improve one grade level in reading.

From the start, Santana has charted the effectiveness of programs and relied on the data to make changes -- and earn government contracts and private grants. "We always ask, 'Is this working?' And, if it isn't, what must we do to make it work?" Santana says.

Last year, Reading and Beyond took in \$2.5 million, spending just 8% of its budget on administration and fund-raising. The nonprofit has 75 employees, 15 of them full time. This year's budget will get a \$125,000 boost Tuesday when Santana is honored in Sacramento as one of six James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award winners. The awards, in their fourth year, call attention to leaders who find imaginative ways to solve tough problems.

"This award is overwhelming," Santana says. "This is not something you expect to happen."

Santana says that he's a lucky guy.

When he came to the United States to further his education, his tuition and books -- \$30,000 in all -- were covered by church-affiliated donors. In 1999, with a couple months remaining on Santana's visa, Fresno Covenant Foundation, a nonprofit associated with First Covenant Church, gave him that \$20,000 and told him to go help kids. Two years ago, he became a U.S. citizen in August, and a month later participated in an educational forum at the White House.

"What they did for me was unconditional," Santana says of the people who paid for his master's degree. "And I still don't know who they are."

I don't know whether Genesis will survive or not. But its board and executive team might want to drive over to Butler and Chestnut and see for themselves how to succeed, with honor and integrity, on a shoestring.

### **About The Author**

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