



A LEGACY OF LITERACY: THE CINDY POLGER BOOK FUND

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The Words Alive Mission

Words Alive connects children and families with the power of reading. We envision a world where everyone is connected to the power of reading and the innumerable ways it enriches our lives. For nearly 25 years, Words Alive has provided access to quality books, shared reading experiences, and a connection to deep reading that lays the foundation for continued success. Our work has grown to bridge the gap in access to education for underserved children and families. In the 2022-2023 academic year, Words Alive helped over 5,000 children, teens, and families build positive habits, behaviors, and skill sets around reading. More than 1,000 volunteers from 40 states and 27 countries invested their time and passion to support Words Alive's mission.



Launching the Cindy Polger Book Fund

Cindy Polger was one of the early supporters of Words Alive, responsible for developing the foundation of the organization that enables it to remain a vibrant and integral part of the San Diego community today. In addition to naming the organization, Cindy is credited with helping Words Alive establish our long-standing partnership with the Lindsay Community School, a Juvenile Court and Community School through the San Diego County Office of Education, for pregnant and parenting teens. Cindy's dedication, and memory, is woven into every action of the organization.

In 2021, the Cindy Polger Book Fund was launched to lower barriers to accessing our programming by offsetting the cost of books. Core to all our programs is a focus on making access to books and texts a staple in all homes across San Diego. We know that students and families are more likely to read and develop healthy reading habits when age-appropriate books are accessible – and we also know that many of the children and families we serve are living in 'book deserts.' Although we do our best to negotiate rates with publishers and fundraise, we often ask our school and nonprofit partners to share in the cost of books. This often-insurmountable barrier led to the creation of the Cindy Polger Book Fund to directly fund quality, contemporary books to not only be used in Words Alive programming, but to be sent home with youth and families participating in our programs to build their home libraries.

In addition to building libraries in homes and program sites throughout historically underserved communities in San Diego, the Cindy Polger Book Fund planned to support the growth and implementation of programming to reach more families, should there be sufficient funds for book purchases.

Impact

In the 2022-2023 program year, Words Alive honored Cindy's passion for connecting teens to the joy of reading by focusing the Cindy Polger Book Fund to support the Words Alive Adolescent Book Group, a program still thriving after Cindy helped launch it almost 25 years ago.

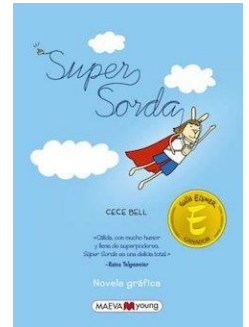
Thanks to the Cindy Polger Book Fund, in 2022-2023 Words Alive was able to purchase 276 contemporary, diverse young adult texts in English and Spanish, as well as an audiobook to accompany the titles for a class of 20 students. The vast majority of books were used to support Adolescent Book Group programming at the Monarch School, part of the Juvenile Court and Community Schools. These books were not only used in the classroom to launch the engaging projects, writing workshops, and discussion sessions key to the Adolescent Book Group, but also added to each participant's home library. The Monarch School serves unhoused and systems-impacted youth, making the building



of those libraries even more meaningful. One Words Alive partner teacher described the significance of books for her students:

“When they get a new book they want to have a safe place for it. A lot of kids are in unstable households and are moving around a lot, so the kids keep their books in their backpacks all year long. They keep all their prized items in their backpacks because it won’t get left behind or lost when going to aunt’s house, grandma’s house or across the border.”

Excitingly, the Cindy Polger Book Fund enabled Words Alive to purchase several young adult titles in Spanish this year, creating meaningful access to quality books for each student in the classroom. One such title was *El Deafo* by Cece Bell (*Super Sorda* in Spanish), an autobiographical graphic novel about friendship, disability, and fitting in. While graphic novels are enormously popular with teens, this particular text was out of print in Spanish, therefore increasing book prices. Staying true to Words Alive’s core values of equitability and responsiveness meant that book purchases would exceed the allocated budget, and the partner site was unable to absorb the cost. The Cindy Polger Book Fund bridged this gap by funding multiple purchases of *Super Sorda*, ensuring every student in the class had equitable access to the book in the language of their choice.



Next Steps

In 2023, Words Alive was gifted a 5,000 square foot building in the East Village in Downtown San Diego which will become our headquarters and a hub for community efforts surrounding youth education and literacy. This gift from Karen & Jeff Silberman ensures Words Alive, and our highly effective programming, has a permanent home in San Diego. Our new headquarters are in the heart of our community, with 70% of our school and community partners within six miles of the building. This larger, centralized location will enable the Cindy Polger Book Fund to have an even greater impact on Words Alive’s partner schools.

Thank You

Words Alive thanks Cindy’s family and friends for continuing her legacy of literacy by connecting young people in San Diego to quality, contemporary books relevant to their lived experiences. With the support of the Cindy Polger Book Fund, Words Alive looks forward to further increasing access to diverse texts and working together to shift the tide in the literacy crisis.

