

*Word
Power*

**COLLEEN GRAY HAS
ADVOCATED FOR
LITERACY IN THE VAIL
VALLEY SINCE 1990**

By Laura Lieff

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENT BINGHAM



Colleen Gray has spent the last 34 years helping people achieve literacy.

LITERACY IS POWER AND

possibility, open doors and fleshed-out ideas. It breeds independence and understanding, not to mention nuance and capability. Literacy is a future. And it sure has come a long way in Eagle County — especially in the last 34 years, which is when Colleen Gray founded The Literacy Project. She's currently the Executive Director. Originally from Ocean County, New Jersey, Gray "traded the ocean for the mountains" when she moved to the valley in 1983. Three kids (Mitch, David and Kate) and three decades later, she is continuing to make an impact on local literacy.

It all started in July 1990, when Gray was teaching Spanish at Colorado Mountain College, and serendipitously noticed a task force meeting taking place. Back then, the Eagle Valley Library District was called the Eagle County Public Library and the director, Amy Niswanger, along with representatives from Colorado Mountain College and Eagle County School District, were meeting to discuss parental illiteracy. The group was also pursuing the Library Services and Construction Act Grant.

"I walked by the task force meeting and was curious," recalls Gray. "I knew a few people in the meeting, so I followed up, applied for the position and the rest is history."

The group applied for the grant, received it, and hired Gray to be the volunteer and student coordinator. With her double major in English and Spanish, her skills were an excellent fit.

"The task force was convening because they observed how many adults in town couldn't help kids with their homework, so they decided to write the grant for adult literacy — and that's when The Literacy Project began," recalls Gray.

She then spearheaded filing for the 501(c)(3), which necessitated writing the bylaws and everything that goes along with obtaining the charitable designation. Gray's middle child, David, remembers that, even though his mother was extremely busy with her work, she always made it to her children's activities and sports.

"She was constantly tutoring and teaching while running The Literacy Project, but always showed up for us," says David. "She had so much energy then and still does!"

Humble beginnings

Initially, The Literacy Project was housed in the Warner Professional Building in EagleVail. When the Avon Library was built in 1993, Gray asked for some space there. And that's where her office still is today. Over the years, that partnership between the Library District and The Literacy Project remains vital to the organization's success.

"Literacy and libraries go hand in hand so working together continues to be beneficial to everyone involved," Gray says.

Since its inception, The Literacy Project has created and operated multiple programs including Adult Literacy, Reading Buddies, Raising A Reader, and Study Friends. Learners in the Adult Literacy Program seek to improve their literacy skills and

often have specific goals. Small-group English classes and one-on-one tutoring are offered, as well as other types of literacy support based on individual needs. Though many adult learners in the community already speak and read English well, some need additional support for specific matters such as various applications, registering to vote, getting a license, or helping their children with their homework.

Young literacy

By 1995, The Literacy Project added middle school students to their repertoire via the Study Friends Program since elementary school children were already receiving support through the Title 1 grant — a federal program that supports elementary education. Designed to help middle schoolers improve their reading, writing, math and homework skills, the Study Friends Program pairs them with an adult volunteer tutor. The students are usually referred by their school counselor or teacher and the volunteer tutors meet with students each week. Another popular program, Reading Buddies, is a collaboration with the Eagle Valley Library District to pair teens and elementary age children. The big buddy and little buddy read together, play reading-based games and participate in group activities.

"We match volunteer high school students with children in grades one through three for an hour of reading time each week," says Gray. "The Reading Buddies provide leadership, responsibility, and community service opportunities which helps foster their love of reading."

Created for preschool children, Raising A Reader provides students across the county with a fresh set of award-winning children's books packed into bright red bags. This creative "rotating book bag" helps facilitate a home/school connection that engages parents as participating partners in their child's reading development.

Relying on generosity

As with anything worth doing, it takes a village to prevent illiteracy in Eagle County and the volunteers play a big role in making that happen. Two Literacy Project volunteers, Leslie Hoffman and Sarah Hiner, were recently recognized for their efforts and Marion Martin was hired a few months ago as the new Adult Literacy Coordinator.

"The profound impact Colleen Gray has had on our community is immeasurable," says Martin. "Her tireless dedication to championing literacy across all ages — from young children to adults — through tutoring, classes and countless community initiatives is truly remarkable."

Outside of tutoring, Gray says that volunteers and students form strong, long-lasting connections as they become friends and engage in social activities.

"It's great seeing how much time our volunteers give to the students and the progress being made," Gray adds. "We have students who get their GED, citizenship, a job promotion and sometimes they further their education at CMC. Some have even started their own businesses!"

In addition to relying on volunteers, The Literacy Project counts on grants — the largest comes from the Eagle Valley Library District — as well as the generosity of community groups such as the Edwards and Vail Rotaries, partnering businesses like The Bookworm, and individual donors.

"This year's Eagle Valley Library District grant will allow us to replace most of our literacy collection that is housed at all three libraries," says Gray. She also points out that individual donors continue to be vital to the organization. "Our community donors are essential — especially those who pass on the importance of literacy to future generations and help break the cycle of illiteracy through legacy giving."

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Both the Edwards and Vail Rotary Clubs recently collaborated with The Literacy Project and The Bookworm to get best-selling graphic novel “Waverider” into the hands of local third through eighth graders.

“A community is only as great as its individuals’ reading, writing and language skills,” says Linda Hill of the Edwards Rotary Club. “Through her leadership of The Literacy Project, Colleen provides tools to our Eagle Valley residents, as well as our local students.”

Even though Gray is a longtime literacy advocate, she still vividly remembers the creative fundraising events that took place over the years — including burro races in Minturn and adult spelling bees.

“My siblings and I wore bee costumes for the spelling bees and helped out with the other fundraisers,” David remembers. “Those events were so fun and I loved watching my mom as she diligently helped others.”

While both events were exciting and memorable, Gray says the annual Literacy Luncheon continues to be the most successful method of fundraising. Last year’s luncheon featured New York Times bestselling author Lisa See, who discussed her latest novel, “Lady Tan’s Circle of Women.”

“Her books are deeply researched, lyrical stories about Chinese characters and culture,” Gray explains. “In addition, we spotlighted a few heartwarming volunteer/student success stories.”

Making a county-wide difference

Although Gray is extremely humble when it comes to her 30-year impact on the community, she does recognize that The Literacy Project garners results. “Consistent volunteering and student interaction and dedication creates the most success,” she says. “I am proud of our students, both children and adults, who overcome many challenges. Reading and writing are the cornerstones of people living happy and productive lives and it means a lot to help them with that.”

Sloan Munter, Director of Educational Programs for The Literacy Project, calls the organization life-changing. “I’ve been working with Colleen since 1995 and have watched The Literacy Project thrive

thanks to her initial vision and longtime dedication,” says Munter. “Collaborating with her for almost three decades to help both adults and children change their lives through literacy has been a pleasure.”

“My mom always wants to help others,” David adds. “What’s most important to her is when people go from learning a language to

speaking it, and she sees that lightbulb turn on for them when they really get it. She has helped so many adults and kids — it’s beyond inspiring.”

When Gray is not working, spending time with her children or buying books for her young grandchild, she can be found golfing, reading for her three book clubs, or planning her next travel adventure. **vvm**

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE LITERACY PROJECT, VISIT WWW.LITERACYPROJECTEAGLECOUNTY.ORG

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