



Houdini Was

How one tiny hamster is helping Yakima Valley Partners for Education turn the literacy wheel

Once upon a time, a class of second graders at White Bluffs Elementary School in Richland, Wash. became published authors. It all started when their classroom pet – a hamster named Houdini – unexpectedly died. They loved Houdini very much, and they were sad.

The children's teacher, Christan Connors, thought that if her students could journal about Houdini, they could process their feelings. She was right. "We realized she was so much more than just a hamster," Connors said.

Connors developed her students' writings and drawings they made into a book manuscript. They called it Houdini Was – as in, "Houdini was so much more than a classroom pet. She was a superhero, a spy, an escape artist, an athlete, and a clown."

"She reminded us to eat our vegetables and get exercise, but also other important things like 'never give up' and 'always be nice to your friends,'" Connors said.

Connors submitted the manuscript to a Scholastic book publishing contest for children. Two months later, they got the news: Out of more than 2,000 manuscripts received, *Houdini Was* won the contest. Scholastic published 1 million copies of the book, and children around the country learned the story of the little pet hamster and all she taught the children who loved her.

Getting the Book to Children

Fast forward to 2022, 12 years after the book's publication. Christan Connors's parents, Ken and Sharon Smith, had always loved the book. As a Heritage University board member, Ken Smith was aware of the efforts of Yakima Valley Partners for Education's (YVPE) work to help children meet and exceed third-grade reading proficiency; Heritage's Collective Impact (CI) division has been the convening and organizing entity for YVPE. The message that helping kids learn to read is everyone's job resonated with Smith.

"Ken and I talked about how bilingual books help us in our literacy work not just with the children but with parents, too, because many parents and grandparents in the valley don't speak English," said Suzy Diaz, Collective Impact director. "If we can support Spanish-speaking parents in reading to their child, there's the possibility that both will enjoy reading more and that can create at-home literacy habits."



*This summer, Christan Connors and one of her 2010 second graders, Lily Ferguson, read *Houdini Was* to a class of three- to five-year-olds at Heritage's Early Learning Center (ELC).*

Smith bought the publishing rights to the book, had it redesigned to include Spanish along with English, and had it printed. Since its Spring 2023 publication, YVPE partners Educational Service District (ESD) 105, Yakima Valley Farmworkers Clinic, and the United Family Center Behavior Health and Family Services have been distributing the book

throughout the Valley. Sixteen libraries in the Yakima Public Library System, as well as the bookmobile, received copies.

A life-size Houdini “learning ambassador,” or mascot, was produced and now brings the story to life at many readings.

“We felt a mascot would make it that much more fun for kids and adults,” Diaz said. “So now ESD 105 brings her to the Yakima Farmers Market, Yakima Valley Farmworkers Clinic has made her part of its medical outreach, and the United Family Center is taking her to Yakima Valley Libraries this fall. They distribute copies of Houdini Was as well as other books for new readers.

“It’s been very popular,” Diaz said. “We promote it on our social media, which also gets shared a lot. People tell us they look to our page as a resource – that is progress in terms of keeping excitement for reading going among families.”

“The ripple effect from this book keeps going,” Connors said.

Literacy Matters – For All

Just as early reading matters for kids, digital literacy is important for adults, and that’s part of YVPE’s work as well. Many adults in families that are served by YVPE lack the basic computer skills necessary to navigate much of modern daily living and caring for a family.



Christan Connors (back center) and Lily Ferguson (back right) pose with Houdini and the children from Heritage’s Early Learning Center (ELC).

As a part of its adult-oriented digital literacy effort, YVPE Food Security Community Liaison Lorena Legorreta developed a curriculum that can be used to teach adults how to use computers. She’s taught instructors how to provide that education.

In the last year, YVPE has opened the online world and all its resources to 160 Spanish-speaking adults who previously lacked computer knowledge and skills. Now, things like applying for public benefits, searching for available food, developing a good food plan, and even finding recipes are possible.

The adults have continuing access to computer labs at Nuestra Casa in Sunnyside and United Family Center in Grandview.

Third-grade literacy progress is slow but steady. YVPE statistics show individual growth and improvement in third-grade reading skills with, so far, slight increases in the overall district-level percentage in some schools.

“In the work we’re doing, we don’t always see the outcome until later,” Diaz said. “We don’t know what the reading scores will look like in three years, but we know we need everyone to help bring this focus to literacy.

“Our work gets books into homes and can start to get families reading,” Diaz said.

“Looking at the big picture, being readers helps us make sense of the world. Equipping our young people with global skills for citizenship in the 21st century really does start now.” 🌙