

Nila Wiley Remarks: Seventh Annual Storybook Gala
September 12, 2009

It is an honor and a privilege to be here this evening to celebrate with joy the many ways in which Spread the Word Nevada: Kids to Kids creates hope and generates dreams for so many at-risk children. In the past year, I have been blessed by my association with this wonderful organization. Laurie, Lisa and others on the staff are the ultimate professionals, truly dedicated to the well-being of young children in our community.

I have spent most of my life in education, in one capacity or another: a room mother, a PTA board member, a pre-school director, a classroom teacher and now I am very proud to be the counselor at Elbert Edwards Elementary School. In all the years I have served in my field, I have never had the opportunity to work with an organization that had so much heart.

Tonight, I am here to speak on behalf of the youngsters who cannot speak for themselves. In the 18 schools adopted, most of the parents are struggling just to survive. Books are not only a luxury, they are also often not part of the culture. Last year, Spread the Word Nevada adopted our school and it was a grand occasion for all of us. The kids were thrilled to get brand new satchels with five books. Each month thereafter, they were able to add two books to their collection. We also had Snack with Books, after school, where families could see a slideshow as a book was read and the children could add another book to their home libraries.

Las Vegas is a giving community, so we have help in feeding hungry children and donations of clothing and school supplies. Spread the Word Nevada nourishes the heart, the spirit and the soul. Without inspiration and hope, children lose the sparkle in their eyes and the passion to succeed. It is a life-changing experience for families when the beautiful books arrive on a regular basis.

Books are a doorway into the future. They provide those enriching experiences so necessary for success. By reading more, and sharing in the reading, the entire family builds vocabulary. Many of our kids arrive with no real interest in books, because they've only been exposed to textbooks or library books and they belong to someone else. Once the little ones realize these books are truly theirs, they are enchanted. The books are read by parents who may just be learning the language or who cannot tackle adult reading material, by the pre-schoolers in the family, and they are shared with others who live in the home or visit frequently. With this program, we are increasing literacy family by family.

There are so many stories behind the pictures that you see [on the video screens behind me]. I've visited homes with babies and no baby furniture, where children have no beds. I know a mother who worked two jobs while undergoing chemotherapy and radiation for cancer. She was the only parent for her four kids, so she had to work. When funds were low, they paid for utilities in alternate months. Rather than complaining, they turned dinnertime into a special event with candles. Visit an at-risk school during the winter and you will see kids in shorts. Heavy coats, gloves and hats are a luxury. Last year, we had a little girl who wore her mother's robe to school because she had no coat.

At one time, I had a pullout reading program. The delightful book about a child's birthday party didn't seem to interest the kids. When I asked why they didn't like the book, a child inquired, "What's a birthday party?" Among the 80 kids in the program, few had ever had a birthday cake and nobody had ever celebrated the day of their birth. That's why so many "Title One kids" never learn when their birthdays are.

The stories are endless, but the reality is harsh. There isn't much magic in the lives of many of the children in my school and in others like it. It takes a community to raise a child, but it also takes an organization like Kids to Kids to bring the gifts of laughter, imagination and aspirations for a brighter tomorrow.

Children can survive with a meager diet or with shabby clothes. They cannot survive without nourishment to the heart, mind and soul.