



United Way Community Matters

By Mary Lou Goeke

**AmeriCorps Week,
March 9-17, 2013**

First 5 Santa Cruz County and the Santa Cruz Reading Corps (SC Reading Corps), a local AmeriCorps project, is joining the nationwide celebration of AmeriCorps Week, March 9-17. The week is a unique opportunity to spotlight the vital work done by AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA members who serve through thousands of nonprofit groups, public agencies and faith-based organizations across the country. AmeriCorps was created in 1993 and is a national service organization with about 100,000 members serving across the United States to help meet critical needs in the areas of education, health, the environment, disaster services, veterans, and economic opportunity. The theme of AmeriCorps Week 2013, AmeriCorps Works, reflects the value and effectiveness of AmeriCorps. Every day in communities across America, AmeriCorps members make our communities safer, stronger, healthier and improve the lives of tens of millions of our most vulnerable citizens.

Locally, First 5 Santa Cruz County has partnered with AmeriCorps to create the Santa Cruz Reading Corps, comprised of 11 AmeriCorps members who serve over 500 children in preschool and transitional kindergarten classrooms in both the Live Oak and Pajaro Valley Unified School Districts. The focus of the SC Reading Corps is to promote strong literacy and language foundations for young children, especially dual language learners. Local and statewide data indicate that well over half of California - and Santa Cruz County - 3rd grade children are not reading at proficiency. Research shows that when students get off to a poor start in reading, they rarely catch up with other students. A 2011 study reported that students who do not read proficiently by 3rd grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school. Happily, research also shows that almost all children have the capacity to learn to read proficiently if effective interventions are provided. Because language development in the early years is crucial to later reading success, the SC Reading Corps tutors are helping to boost the early literacy skills of children in English as they prepare to enter Kindergarten. They provide support to the classrooms' routines by implementing specific research-based strategies in vocabulary building, letter names and sounds, alliteration and rhyming. Each tutor receives extensive training, coaching and support to track and guide children in English language development through one-on-one and small group interventions. SC Reading Corps members also facilitate Raising a Reader, a weekly rotating book bag program that provides books and support for families to read aloud with their children. The consistent effort and dedication of the Santa Cruz Reading Corps will move children on the road to

enter Kindergarten more school ready and go on to become fluent readers by third grade.

AmeriCorps service also benefits the members in many ways. Whatever an individual's reason for joining SC Reading Corps, most experience an intrinsic growth. Some join because it's a great way to build experience in the working world and network with education professionals. Others have years of experience and are seeking to broaden their knowledge or make a career change. Others serve because they enjoy working with children and are looking for a deeper connection to their community and local school. SC Reading Corps positions are not permanent jobs; they're a temporary service. Members make a 9-month commitment, during which they receive a modest living allowance and education award. Motivated individuals who serve in local programs like SC Reading Corps are making a commitment to give of themselves to make an impact in our community. AmeriCorps members serve because they believe that they can make a difference—that it is our world and our chance to make it better. They are truly Getting Things Done! Here is what two of our SC Reading Corps members have to say about their service this year:

"Many of the students [in my class] have built up their English comprehension skills and are able to hold conversations with their peers and myself. The resiliency and strength of these students has helped me realize how essential it is to invest in these children's education now as it will build a strong foundation for the rest of their lives." - Jessica

"Since starting to work in my classroom in September, I have noticed a dramatic and rapid growth in not only the language and literacy skills of my students but also in their enthusiasm and motivation for learning...it is incredibly rewarding to see such tangible results so quickly from my students." - Elena

If you are interested in learning more about the Santa Cruz Reading Corps, contact Christine Sieburg (831) 465-2208 or come to the next information night on March 27th, 5:30 p.m. at First Five Santa Cruz County, 4450 Capitola Road. To learn more about the Santa Cruz Reading Corps, visit www.first5scc.org. To learn more about AmeriCorps, visit www.americorps.gov.

For the past 20 years Mary Lou Goeke has been the Executive Director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County. She has 37 years of experience providing social services to elders, children and families. The mission of United Way is to improve the lives of the people of Santa Cruz County by convening the community to seek solutions to their needs and by efficiently raising funds for the human care programs the United Way supports. Their website is www.unitedwaysc.org.