

# Stories



WILLIAM CASPAR GRAUSTEIN  
MEMORIAL FUND

September 2009  
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Submitted by Bridgeport

## Lee Y Seras

“It was so much more than I expected,” said Carmen Rodriguez, Coordinator of the Family Resource Center in Bridgeport Connecticut in response to whether the literacy and parent engagement program entitled, “Lee y Seras” met her expectations.

Rodriguez learned about the program from Sonja Ahuja, childcare advocate and a Discovery Liaison. Sonja shared stories of the program’s success in Wilton, Connecticut and the community’s partnership with Scholastic Books. Rodriguez thought this program could make a difference in Bridgeport and didn’t waste any time contacting Scholastic for their help implementing the program in Latino communities in Bridgeport. With the Bridgeport Alliance for Young Children (BAYC), the Parent Engagement and Support Goal Group and participants from the Leadership in Action Program (LAP), Carmen hit the ground running with this initiative.

Originally funded by Discovery grant dollars to promote early childhood education through the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, Lee y Seras is a successful parent program adopted by the Bridgeport public schools designed to help Latino children realize their potential as strong readers and learners.

Already engrossed in her full time job as the Family Resource Center Coordinator, Carmen Rodriguez took on the added responsibility of coordinating and facilitating the Lee y Seras parent program. The Lee y Seras class consisted of 18 Latino families whose children were 3-4 years of age, never attended a formal preschool. With partnerships, including the Friends of the Bridgeport Public Library, Carmen managed to recruit a volunteer, Julio Reinoso and secure space to meet with the families every Tuesday evening for six weeks at the library in downtown Bridgeport.

“Having the meetings in the Bridgeport Public Library exposed the parents to resources, beyond books, such as technology and online sources. Parents were amazed. One of the parents even managed to secure a job at the library at the conclusion of the six weeks,” said Carmen.



*Early Education Teacher with the daughter of one of the participants.*



*Julio Reinoso and Carmen M. Rodriguez lead a parent workshop.*

Adopted by parent engagement group of BAYC introduced into Bridge Flyers were produced and the response was positive. After the parents were selected and registered the curriculum was set. Stories, food, and music traditions were built into the

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program as a mechanism to teach children the building blocks of reading. Carmen was ready. The curriculum was carefully packaged and developed by Scholastic, Verizon and La Raza (a California based Family Resource Center).

“I had parents sign a contract to commit and keep track of the activities learned and applied from every session and they ALL did it for six week straight,” says Rodriguez.

Each week the group would meet, at the library and have a light meal with their families. Later the parents would move to another room to discuss their stories and the topic of the week, while a childcare worker provided by Scholastic would read and interact with the children. Group sessions included mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles and sometimes more than one family member per child. Conversations in Spanish during these sessions would begin with icebreakers and then parents would share their personal stories on how they were first introduced to literacy.

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Another parent, Ruth Navarro said she participated in the six week session and tells everyone she knows about the program. Her husband was unable to participate, but she shared with him a principle she learned at the session, “It is important for my husband to read to my son at night like I do,” said Navarro. Her husband now reads to their five year old son at bedtime daily.

At the conclusion of the program the families visited the local zoo as a reward for their hard work. Carmen had noted during the application process that none of the families previously visited the zoo so that the field trip experience would be new and a great family and community oriented activity.

Overall, the facilitators, Carmen and Julio, discovered the importance of being grounded in one’s culture allows a second language to be learned quicker and easier. Many of the parents in the beginning thought it best to ignore their own culture and heritage and immerse themselves in American culture. However, Lee y Seras proved differently. By embracing their heritage and sharing family ancestry each parent had a medium to promote literacy in their families.



*Lee Y Seras Graduation at Bridgeport Public Library – May 2008*

As an added benefit, each parent received one book to read to their families. The books provided were age appropriate, bilingual and elaborated on the topic discussed for that week. As a result, parents expanded their understanding of their child’s development.

## **So, what’s next for Lee y Seras?**

Carmen says that with the success of the program last April and May, she has been asked by several other institutions to implement Lee y Seras in their community. She is truly excited about the possibility of spreading the word.

Lee y Seras has proven to be an excellent vehicle to promote culture, community, family literacy, parent empowerment and engagement. This program is a true testament to how everyday experiences are the basis for emerging literacy skills. Parents come away with an increased knowledge of child development and the building blocks for literacy.

“This program challenged me as the facilitator and I am grateful to have been a part of something BIG,” says Carmen Rodriguez. Lee y Seras has grown into a quality program that has taken parent leadership and child literacy to new heights. It became clear that families, school and communities are all important partners toward ensuring excellence in educating and rearing preschool aged children. ■

*The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut’s children by supporting school change, informing the public debate on educational issues, and strengthening the involvement of parents and the community in education.*



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