

Raise-a-Reader: Books, classes and kind words help family get through COVID-19 crisis

The Canucks Family Education Centre provides help to families through high school upgrading classes for adults and the Get Ready 2 Read (GR2R) program for preschool children.

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Four-year-old Alice Gutierrez shows off one of her art projects. Photo by Jenny Gutierrez /PNG

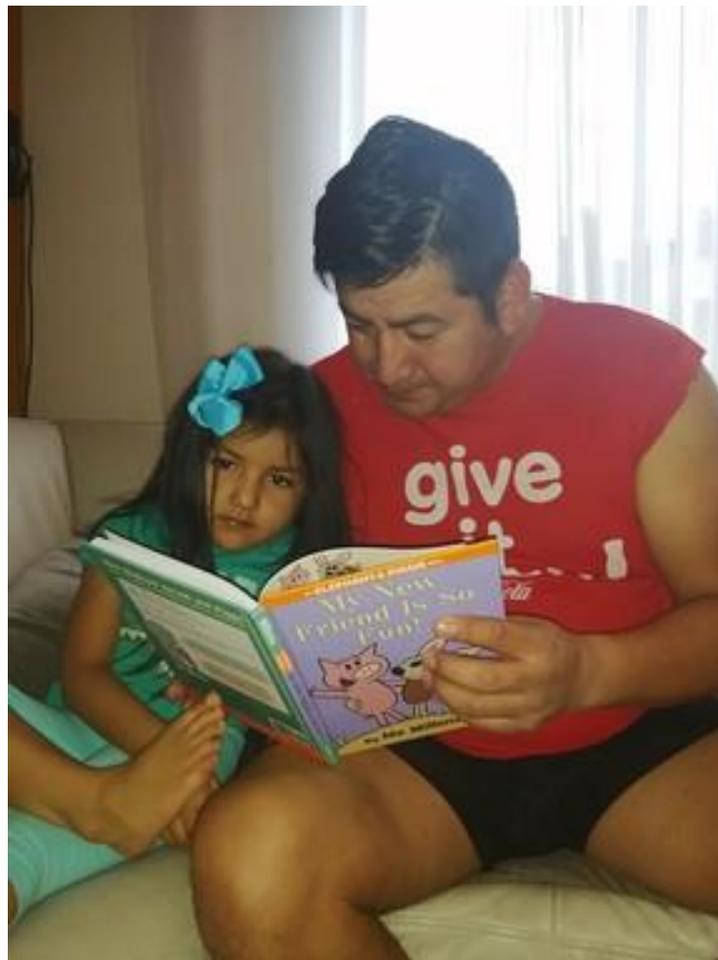
The Gutierrez family powered through a COVID-19 crisis with a little help from friends with books, food, and encouragement.

After Buenaventura Gutierrez was diagnosed he was hospitalized and intubated for five weeks. The rest of his family, including his wife Jenny and their three children, also became infected. They were quarantined for a month, in their small Burnaby apartment along with Jenny's sister and nephew.

“It was a really hard time for us,” said Jenny.

She arrived in Vancouver from Lima, Peru, in 2007; Buenaventura arrived in 2010. They are now parents to Fernanda, 11, Christopher, nine, and Alice, four.

During their trial-by-COVID, the family received aid from the Canucks Family Education Centre (CFEC). Through partners Burnaby Community and Continuing Education and the Vancouver School Board, the CFEC provides help to families through high school upgrading classes for adults and the Get Ready 2 Read (GR2R) program for preschool children.



Buenaventura Gutierrez reads with four-year-old Alice, his youngest daughter. Photo by Jenny Gutierrez /PNG

The CFEC is partly funded by the Sun’s Raise-a-Reader campaign. Since 1997, Raise-a-Reader has raised over \$20 million.

Gutierrez began the adult literacy courses in 2018. Her youngest, Alice, participates in the GR2R program.

“It was awesome during the year of the pandemic because the CFEC kept teaching us online and giving us craft materials and class resources and also food, gift cards, and personal support,” she said. “It helped us to keep working with our children instead of having them in front of a device or video games.”

Parents enrolled in the upgrading classes are also eligible to receive free transit tickets, food, laptop computers, schools supplies, disposal masks and personal hand sanitizer.

CFEC’s adult literacy program is helping Gutierrez improve her English. She currently works as a caregiver. Her husband, who was studying accounting, now works in construction.

It was during Buenaventura’s hospital stay, a stressful time for the family, that the CFEC really came through.

“The program coordinators called me every other day to ask me how things were going, and told me that they were praying for us,” Gutierrez said. “My goal is to become a nurse and help others in the same way, and to be of service.”

Her children Fernanda and Christopher read “a lot,” she said. Fernanda’s favourite books are a series by YouTube naturalist Coyote Peterson. When Postmedia talked to her, she was reading Peterson’s *The King of Sting*.

“She likes to read different books,” Jenny said. “Sometimes she’ll spend two hours reading.”

Christopher’s tastes run towards books about animals and soccer — with an emphasis on soccer. Buenaventura reads mostly in Spanish but also tries to read in English with Alice. The four-year-old’s favourites are the *Elephant & Piggie* series by Mo Willems.

“She loves when I read them to her,” Jenny said.

Buenaventura is now home, after two months in the hospital.

“He is facing some sequelae in his heart such as tachycardia,” Gutierrez said. “He’s working on his weak muscles and sometimes he gets stuck when he is eating. We continue working on those things. Sometimes I feel tired but our faith and our strength remain firm.”

How to donate

Since its launch in 1997, Raise-a-Reader has provided more than \$20 million to promote literacy in B.C.

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