

The Robin Hood of Library Books Delivers the Goods

Efforts of Rossier graduate student Danny Brassell double the holdings of Compton Schools libraries.

by Meg Sullivan

If USC Rossier School of Education graduate student Danny Brassell were a character in a children's book, he'd be Robin Hood.

Since founding "Assignment: Books" in 1996, the former Compton elementary school teacher has hit on a sure-fire formula for helping the poor schools in the district where he worked for three years.

Largely by mobilizing wealthier schools to hold book drives, he's been able to funnel 65,000 new and used titles to 13 schools in the perennially troubled Compton Unified School District.

SUCH EFFORTS HAVE resulted in the reopening of four school libraries. The latest "grand

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reopening" was held earlier this month at Dickison Elementary



School, CUSD's third-largest elementary school. Until Assignment: Books secured 12,000 new and used titles for the school, the Dickison Dolphin Library had been shuttered for more than a decade.

"You need a visionary to get the ball rolling," said Dickison Principal Jane Harris. "Danny was that visionary."

The prospect of approximately doubling the library's original holdings inspired

the district to provide new tables and bookshelves for the library. It also motivated school officials, who had no budget for a librarian, to free up a teacher's aide to staff the library in the morning.

The school's PTA, meanwhile, rallied to secure parent volunteers to keep the library running during the afternoon.

Two teachers worked for a month after school on a giant mural for the library's north wall. On opening day, Max, the protagonist of beloved storybook "Where the Wild Things Are," pranced through the mural's palm-dotted landscape worthy of author-illustrator Maurice Sendak.

"This is beyond my expectations," marveled Harris, surveying the scene.

Harris might as



Above, students at Dickison Elementary School take the stage on April 4 to celebrate their library's overhaul. Left, Danny Brassell in the school's library. None of the four schools Brassell helped supply with books had an operational library before Assignment: Books. "Now these students have access to more books than some students in more affluent districts," Brassell said.

well have been describing Brassell's reactions to his first book drive as a second-grade teacher at Marian Anderson Elementary School in Compton. Officials at the private K-12 Brentwood School offered to conduct a book drive, which netted 2,500 books for Anderson in 1996.

"I decided if I could get books that easily for one school, we could replicate the results in other schools," Brassell said.

AT THE TIME, CUSD housed only 54,000 titles, district officials told Brassell. So with its 65,000 contributions over the past four years, Assignment: Books has more than doubled the district's holdings. The four elementary school libraries that Assignment: Books reopened are at McKinley (in 1998, with 8,000 donated titles), Willard (1999, 10,000) and Carver (also 1999, 10,000). At those schools, the books-per-student ratio now stands at 20 to 1, better than the national average of 18 to 1 as well as the California (12 to 1) and Los Angeles average (6 to 1).

"None of these schools had an operational library before Assignment: Books," Brassell said. "Now these students have access to more books than some students in more affluent districts."

While continuing to approach more affluent K-12 Southern California schools for donations, Brassell found a powerful ally after enrolling at USC. The university's Volunteer Center linked him with USC undergraduates who have collected more than 6,000 books. One particularly successful strategy involved pitting sororities and fraternities against each other in a race for books.

Brassell also mobilizes sup-

port from nonprofit organizations such as Friends of the Library and the Salvation Army, such businesses as Children's Book World and Panavision, and various individual donors. The group never accepts financial contributions - only books and other library necessities, including shelves, library furniture and computers.

Dickison celebrated the library's overhaul with a special assembly April 4 in the school's courtyard. Attendees included district officials and representatives from one of the three schools that had held book drives for Dickison. Class after class of Dickison students shuffled to a makeshift stage to sing "The Library Song," re-enact "Milestones in Children's Literature," recite Dr. Seuss or display other touching expressions of gratitude.

IN THE FINAL ACT, Harris, who was principal at McKinley Elementary when Assignment: Books reopened that library in 1998, presented a plaque to Brassell, who then took the stage.

Befitting an educator who borrows a page from the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest, Brassell mischievously chided the district officials to provide the school with a full-time librarian.

"They usually deliver," he later confided.

Then Brassell, a Ph.D. student in language, literacy and learning, started to work on the 700 students in the audience.

"I'm challenging all of you boys and girls to take this opportunity and read, read, read," Brassell said. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes!" shouted the children. ■



Above, the Dickison Dolphin Library before its overhaul; right, 12,000 volumes are now part of the library's holdings. Before Danny Brassell began collecting books, the Compton Schools housed only 54,000 titles. The 65,000 contributions brought in over the past four years by Assignment: Books have essentially doubled the district's holdings. The four schools that received books now have a higher books-per-student ratio (20 to 1) than the national (18 to 1) or the California average (12 to 1).



DANNY BRASSELL