

# The Power of Words and Deeds: How the Right After-School Program Positively Impacts A Community

It began with one small book and one big idea. Bringing them together provided the key to unlock cultural diversity lessons that have reached beyond the classroom into the hearts and lives of participating students and changed them for the better.

Hank Leo was the person who discovered that key and opened the door. As the CEO of the YMCA of the Greater Tri-Valley, Inc., in central New York, Hank is very serious about keeping kids on the right track. He understands the challenges they face in today's fast-paced world, especially learning to accept differences—ability level, race, physical appearance, economic situations—and understanding how each unique difference can be truly beneficial to others.

## Importance of Accepting Diversity

The chairman of the Child Care Committee of the YMCAs of New York State, Inc. also knows that the after-school hours, when many kids are home alone or left to their own resources, are times that can translate into trouble. Hank was determined to address both of these issues with a YMCA program that would teach young people the value of understanding and accepting differences in others.

"It became very obvious to me that we needed a program that would address acceptance and appreciation of diversity," Hank says. "We're located about halfway between Albany and Buffalo and have many different ethnic cultures in our area. It's so important to bring people together to understand each other. Kids need to realize that cultural differences can be a positive thing. Once they understand that, their confidence and self-esteem begin to grow and they also become much more accepting of others. They can see how we can accomplish more by

working together and realizing all the strengths different people bring to the table and the many things we can learn from each other. They come to understand that everyone has a special value and self-worth."

To cut through these cultural barriers, and reinforce the four key values that are the foundation of the YMCA—honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility—Hank did some research and found the Major League Baseball (MLB) initiative "Breaking Barriers," which hosts an annual essay contest to encourage children to write about barriers they have overcome in life. Hank took it one step further by engaging the New York communities of Rome and Oneida and asking them to participate in a community-wide effort to help kids and adults share stories about how they personally used the Y's values to overcome major barriers. And, instead of simply asking people to write about conquering barriers, Hank also enlisted caring community leaders to speak with the children about overwhelming odds and problems they had risen above in their own lives. This inspiration helped the kids create even better essays.

Students also performed service projects and composed essays about their experiences, ultimately submitting some 5,500 essays to the YMCA. And because many of the essays came from young people with disabilities, the Y recognized a special need and offered its services to the local Special Olympics, as well as ARC, the community-based organization of and for people with intellectual and developmental difficulties. Both groups welcome and celebrate diversity and the lessons that can be learned from it. These partnerships and initiatives created what is now the YMCA of the Greater Tri-Valley's "Say 'Yes' to Character" program.



## Recognizing Special Talents

"Say 'Yes' to Character" places special emphasis on teaching children how to put fear and anger aside and become socially competent in order to resolve conflicts through communication and cooperation. "The goal of the program is to see a positive change in students' understanding of diversity, self-worth, confidence levels, school participation, and strength of character," Hank emphasizes.

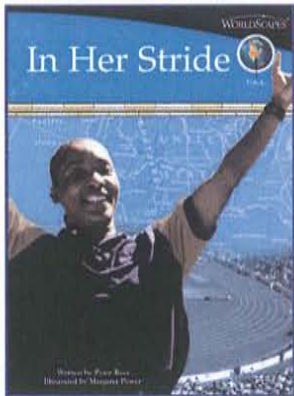


Literally bringing diverse people together at the Y to learn from and understand one another is one of the program's major goals.

"I thought it would be a good idea to bring people here who had special circumstances they had to face," Hank says. "For instance, Special Olympics candidates could come to our Y and train with outstanding college athletes. People with disabilities obviously have to deal with many more barriers than the average person. To help them cope with that, we awarded youth scholarships, which included a YMCA membership, and offered them the opportunity for mentoring and partnerships."

### One Book Brings It Together

It was while working on this aspect of the program that Hank became familiar with Loretta Claiborne, an award-winning long distance runner and spokesperson for the global Special Olympics movement. And he discovered Loretta's inspiring story in a book entitled **In Her Stride**, which chronicles Loretta's struggle with learning disabilities, her success at overcoming them, and her amazing achievements with the Special Olympics. Despite impaired sight and mild intellectual disabilities, she's won four gold medals and earned ESPN's Arthur Ashe Award for courage.



"Loretta's story couldn't have been more in line with what we're all about," Hank emphasizes. "We try to do our best to promote a healthy spirit, mind, and body. It's not just about the body—it's all three. There has to be a balance. Loretta is a symbol of all those things and she continues to be a shining example of overcoming barriers."

### Vistas del mundo®

The Spanish counterpart to the exclusive ETA/Cuisenaire WorldScapes® series, Vistas del mundo, is an extraordinary cross-cultural, cross-curricular leveled literacy resource. These authentic Spanish books feature multicultural images, character lessons, and real-world applications. Some 100 dynamic texts, written specifically for Spanish-speaking students, support reading and language arts, social studies, math, history, and science, and share the same innovative approach to literacy instruction and skill development as their WorldScapes companions.

**In Her Stride** is part of WorldScapes®, a unique cross-cultural, cross-curricular leveled literacy series developed by educational publisher ETA/Cuisenaire, widely recognized as the premier publisher and pioneer of Interactive Literacy and manipulatives-based education. With more than 8,000 supplemental reading, math, and science resources, ETA/Cuisenaire is dedicated to helping students become good readers, so that the world literally becomes an open book to them.

Based on the belief that reading is undeniably the foundation for success in society, the WorldScapes series combines hands-on learning experiences, nonfiction and fiction texts, and research-based instructional strategies to inspire students through character lessons that focus on universal values. The series provides six distinct books for each of 25 different countries that present a multicultural forum for developing critical thinking and character education.

### The WorldScapes Benefit

"WorldScapes is a real one-of-a-kind literacy experience," says Hank. "The books familiarize students with the traditions, values, environments, and cultures that reflect the ethnic diversity found in today's world, while at the same time teaching important literacy skills."



"This is a very different method of education and that's what really made me a believer in these books," he continues. "The heroes in these stories are not offered up in regular classroom textbooks. They're real people who have overcome real obstacles. That's something kids can relate to. Plus, the books are short and easy-to-read. That's important to get kids engaged. And, the stories focus on the same family and personal values that embody what our YMCA stands for. In other words, these books are just perfect for us."

### Learning From One Another

Under the direction of Hank and School-Age Childcare Director Marialena Froio, the Greater Tri-Valley YMCA has developed a centers-based cultural learning program around 20 specific books in the WorldScapes series. Over 600 students at 24 different sites participate daily in hands-on lessons before and after school, and also on vacation days or snow days. Marialena and



Hank work closely with the individual school districts to assure all the details are in place each day.

"We understand that every child learns in a different way at a different level," explains Marialena. "So we have activities at each center that are designed to address these differences. First, the kids will read a WorldScapes® book, then we have a very open, engaged discussion about what they've read. The students are free to move around the room, talk, ask questions, and activate any prior knowledge they may have about the topic. Finally, we have a hands-on activity—a craft or something similar that they can take home with them. So throughout, every one is very engaged.

"Not only are our students learning acceptance and awareness and how to overcome obstacles," Marialena continues, "but one of the really exciting things we've found is that we're also teaching the parents. Because these kids are taking their WorldScapes projects home and talking about what they've learned, many of the parents are also beginning to have a greater understanding of diversity and the fact that we should all be tolerant, responsible members of a global community. This program is actually educating the whole family. That is very, very gratifying."

In addition to the WorldScapes classroom lessons, the YMCA of the Greater Tri-Valley created an essay contest of its own around the subject of overcoming obstacles and breaking barriers. Children are encouraged to submit stories detailing how they've addressed these issues at home, at school, or in the community. It's been a resounding success. The first year of the program yielded 1,000 essays. To date, close to 10,000 essays have been received, and in 2008, Hank opened the contest up to other media. Students are now encouraged to submit a collage, a video, or music, in addition to the written word, in order to really express themselves freely.

"It's amazing what we've received," says Hank. "These kids are really putting a lot of thought and attention into this. We've gotten essays about abuse, divorce, and deaths in the family. Some of them have written about the meaning of politics and freedom and what their parents had to go through in another country. It's clear the lessons about accepting diversity and overcoming obstacles are taking hold. And the lessons learned through WorldScapes are a major part of that."

### Overcoming Hardships

A poignant example of how students are learning to cope is this excerpt from one student's essay: "When I was two years old, my dad was killed. At that time I lived in Bosnia. By the time I was nine, the war was over and we left for

America. It was hard to leave my best friend and my other family behind. It took determination to get over my dad getting killed. Now that I am older, I understand that what happened made me strong. It made me stronger because when bad things happen to me now, I can handle it. Losing someone important in your family can really hurt, but you can't stay sad and miserable for the rest of your life. You have to be strong."

Another child expressed concern that one of his close family members was an alcoholic; however, he showed the resilience and perseverance he's learned in the Y's program when he wrote, "There will always be barriers in life, but they can't hold me back from my dreams. My determination and integrity help me to get through life and keep a positive attitude."

Essay winners are feted at an awards banquet each fall where, according to Hank, "We honor those champions who have overcome unbeatable odds to succeed in life." Keynote speakers at these dinners have included the late baseball great Tug McGraw; former NBA slam dunk champion Spud Webb; Mary Wilson, an original member of the Supremes singing group; and Loretta Claiborne herself, all of whom personify and reinforce the very characteristics these students are learning through the "Say 'Yes' to Character" program and the WorldScapes books.

The YMCA of the Greater Tri-Valley's lessons in diversity resonate positively in the school classroom as well, as Andria Lacey, Principal at John E. Joy Elementary School in Rome, NY, attests: "The YMCA's program at our school actually takes place across from my office and I've noticed



that the students in the program are definitely more respectful, more responsible, and more cooperative than most of our other students. There's an awareness that permeates throughout the program and into the classroom.

"The program definitely supports what we're trying to convey during the school day," Andria continues, "and there is some planning that does take place between our teachers and the YMCA staff. We're working on doing more of that. In fact, **we** need to do more of what **they're** doing."

### Positive Education Impact

Hank Leo's goal of providing students with the knowledge to overcome obstacles, accept cultural diversity, and improve their education, has been more than unlocked. His program's positive influence is taking hold throughout the community. So what's next? Hank would like to see this program implemented in YMCAs throughout the state of New York and eventually, throughout the country.

"We've been asked several times to carry this program further," he says. "Bring it to the community level and help break down the hundreds of barriers children face today. It could have a huge impact. We know it works because we've seen such positive results with our kids and their families. The WorldScapes® activities and discussion questions spark just the right dialogue to encourage students to think of themselves as responsible members of a global community. I truly believe that every YMCA childcare staff should be working on an expanded diversity program that includes WorldScapes. The four values of the YMCA—honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility—are embodied so well in these books. Young people, and even adults, need to be taught to understand and accept differences in others and break down the barriers to understanding and appreciation. Partnering with companies like ETA/Cuisenaire, who developed WorldScapes, will help us all reach those goals."

And it was just one small book that unlocked the door.

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## About ETA/Cuisenaire

Headquartered in Vernon Hills, IL, just outside of Chicago, ETA/Cuisenaire® is recognized as the premier publisher and pioneer of Interactive Literacy and manipulatives-based education, with more than 8,000 supplemental reading, math, and science resources. Aligned to state and national standards, these products offer hands-on educational opportunities that make learning fun for students and teaching more effective for educators.

Based on the belief that reading is undeniably the foundation for success in society, ETA/Cuisenaire is dedicated to helping students become excellent readers. Using an Interactive Literacy approach that combines hands-on learning experiences, nonfiction and fiction texts, research-based instructional strategies, and professional development support, its resources help teachers achieve powerful results with students of all learning styles and abilities. ETA/Cuisenaire continues to develop innovative supplemental resources to support Interactive Literacy that will help students build the strong literacy skills that are essential for success in school and in life.

## About WorldScapes

An exclusive literacy program developed by ETA/Cuisenaire, WorldScapes is a cross-cultural, cross-curricular resource that transports students beyond their everyday routines. Both fiction and nonfiction books provide insight into the lives and customs of children around the globe and demonstrate how the culture, heritage, and traditions of a country can take hold in the rest of the world. The countries featured reflect the diverse ethnic groups present in American schools today. WorldScapes increases the literacy performance and knowledge of the content areas by introducing students to remarkable places, important people, and critical global issues. Twenty-eight six-title sets, each focusing on a different country or region, present a forum for developing critical thinking, discussing universal values, and integrating character education.

Accompanied by comprehensive teacher notes, activities, and other support materials, WorldScapes books promote critical literacy skills by encouraging students to discuss values, deliberate issues, and form opinions.