

Arizona Daily Star®

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Published: 10.05.2008

Kids' desert tips for newcomers

By Brian J. Pedersen

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Tucson gets a bunch of newcomers each year, many of whom arrive in town severely lacking in knowledge about the surrounding desert and its inhabitants.

An environmental guidebook written and illustrated by local students aims to change that.

"Desert Living Is Different!" will be published this month. It is a 96-page book filled with drawings, essays and poems, all designed to help newcomers better understand what might be roaming among the cacti.

"This book will help tell them what life is like here," said 14-year-old Tea Urbalejo. "What animals are cool, what animals you should use caution around."

Urbalejo, a freshman at Desert View High School, wrote an essay for the book called "Wildlife Is Here, Too!" It was one of about 350 entries submitted by 110 students from seven area school districts, project director Kitty Reeve said.

Reeve, who teaches writing at Pima Community College, said she got the idea about making a book for newcomers after recalling her arrival in Tucson five years ago.

"I made all the mistakes others make, like when you go hiking," Reeve said. "I went hiking without enough water. I picked up the pretty prickly pear fruit and got thorns in my hands."

Reeve said she wanted to get students involved in the project, but at first it was difficult to find teachers who felt such a project could fit within their already stuffed curriculum.

Eventually, she got 20 teachers on board from the Flowing Wells, Indian Oasis, Marana, Sahuarita, Sunnyside, Tucson and Vail school districts.

"They cared enough; they thought it was important enough," Reeve said. "This is the students' outreach to the community."

Genny Hernandez, a fifth-grader at Wheeler Elementary School, said she jumped at the chance to contribute to the project. The 10-year-old drew a picture of an elf owl and wrote a haiku poem about the bird.

"It's nice to share knowledge," Genny said. "I think it's important because some people that I don't even know are going to see it. Like people from China or Mexico."

The Desert Living Is Different! project allowed 11-year-old Lisa Luna to express her love of drawing in a way that can help others, she said.

"New people who just moved here, they're probably really confused about where everything is," said Lisa, a sixth-grader at Sahuarita Middle School. "This book will help them."

Desert Living Is Different! is part of the Southern Arizona Writing Project, which is affiliated with the University of Arizona's English Department.

Reeve, though, said she had to come up with her own funding and managed to take in \$26,950 from various local donors.

"We've had so much in-kind help it's unbelievable," Reeve said. "Everybody loves this project."

That included a \$5,000 donation from Tucson Councilwoman Nina Trasoff, who wrote the foreword to the book.

IF YOU GO

- What: Public reception and book signing for "Desert Living Is Different!" environmental guidebook.
- Where: Ward 6 office, 3202 E. First St.
- When: 3 p.m. Oct. 19.

Trasoff's Ward 6 office, at 3202 E. First St., is also hosting a public reception at 3 p.m. Oct. 19 to kick off publication of *Desert Living is Different!*

The funds raised were enough for 15,000 copies of *Desert Living Is Different!* to be printed, Reeve said. They will be offered for free to anyone who has lived in Tucson for a year or less, while a \$5 donation is suggested for those who have lived here longer.

The donations will allow for additional copies to be produced, Reeve said, noting that it will be available at locations such as the Ward 6 office, the Tucson Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Southern Arizona Writing Project's office at the UA.

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- Contact reporter Brian J. Pedersen at 434-4079 or bjp@azstarnet.com.

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