

Tucson Citizen

110 local students contribute to 'Desert Living Is Different!' book

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When newcomer Maria Grainger wants to know about the desert critters in her backyard, she asks her 10-year-old daughter, Katherine French.

Grainger and her family moved here from Michigan less than two years ago knowing little about desert wildlife.

It's for those newcomers that a book was written and illustrated by local students.

"Desert Living Is Different!" is a collection of art from more than 100 students from kindergarten through 12th grade that provides information to newcomers about Tucson's cactuses, monsoons, snakes, deserts and "water wisdom."

The works in the book were selected by a panel of educators from more than 350 entries.

Hundreds of families gathered Sunday for the book signing by student artists hosted by City Councilwoman Nina Trasoff at the Ward VI office, 3202 E. First St.

Trasoff said the book offers insight from young people to adults on how to "live in, respect and love our Sonoran Desert."

"I'm blown away by the pride in these kids' faces," Trasoff said. "They all know exactly what page they're on. It's great to be a part of this."

Katherine's drawing of a Gila woodpecker on a cactus was one of 110 works selected for the book.

"I had done a report about (woodpeckers) at school and thought, 'I could probably draw their habitat,' " said Katherine, a fifth-grader at Sonoran Science Academy. "Plus there's Woody, the woodpecker that makes holes in our house. He's cute."

In addition to being a guide for newcomers, the book also is helpful for those who have lived in Tucson for less than two years, said Kitty Reeve, the project director.

"I thought students should write a book that helps people become familiar with the environment here and warns them from making the same mistakes I did, like hiking without sunscreen or a cell phone," she said.

The book has 80 pages of drawings, poems and essays, many with serious messages.

Ayanna Eleando, a third-grader at Indian Oasis Primary School, addresses the importance of water conservation through a poem:

"Please, pretty please, remember to turn off the water quickly when you're done washing up."

Ernie Santamaria, 12, who is autistic, painted a saguaro last year. His teacher at Roskrige Bilingual Middle Magnet School entered the painting and it was selected for the book.

"We are so proud that he was picked and mostly that he was able to express himself in an autistic way," said Ernie's mother, Jenny Santamaria.

More than 15,000 copies of the book have been printed and will be distributed to newcomers at the Metropolitan Tucson Convention & Visitors Bureau, Antigone Books, and in visitor packets, Reeve said.

The books now are free, but because of high demand and cost, they later may cost \$5.

Students from Sunnyside, Flowing Wells, Marana, Tucson, Vail, Sahuarita, and Indian Oasis-Baboquivari school districts plus charter schools Sonoran Science Academy and Tucson Accelerated High School participated in the project.
