

# the JOY of reading

*A program shows kids and parents the fun in books, which is bringing their families closer*

By Susan Essoyan



Principals say it is the biggest draw they have ever had, pulling in crowds of families to public schools in the evenings.

Of course, the lure of pizza and prizes helps. But surveys show the Read Aloud Program is leaving a lasting impact at home, getting families to turn off the TV and tune in to each other.

RAP is marking its 10th anniversary by expanding to the Big Island and Maui for the first time this school year, with federal funding.

"Before our first RAP outing, we didn't know what family time was, but now we do," said one parent. "We read together and do things together."

Pedrito Aloang never read to his son Angelo when he was little, instead spending time at work or tending to his chickens.

"My husband is not into this education thing," explained his wife, Nancy. "He'll tell me that's why we have teachers."

But when Read Aloud America came to Kalihi Elementary School earlier this year, drawing big crowds to the campus in the evening, Aloang got curious. Attracted by the upbeat music, laughter and promise of pizza, the whole Aloang family turned out, with 6-year-old Aleczander tugging along with brother Angelo, now 21.

The boisterous pep rally for reading, featuring flying Frisbees and family jokes, soon gave way to the sound of a single soothing voice. In separate clusters around the campus, adults and children listened rapt to stories being read aloud by volunteers.

Since then the pleasure of that simple act has been a nightly ritual for the

Aloangs, as Pedrito and his youngest curl up with a book together at bedtime. Once a reluctant reader, Aleczander often opts to read aloud, and his dad helps him with the hard words.

That lifestyle change is at the heart of Read Aloud America and its Read Aloud Program, or RAP. The made-in-Hawaii nonprofit is marking its 10th anniversary this school year by expanding statewide, visiting schools on Maui and the Big Island for the first time, with federal funding through the state Department of Human Services.

RAP's mission is to build families of lifetime readers. It meets every other week for six sessions during a semester, building new habits gradually, such as "TTTT," or *Turn off the Television Through Thursday*. Life lessons are often couched in humorous tales like "Don't Pee in the Pool," from Marc Gellman's book "Always Wear Clean Underwear."

At Waimalu Elementary School in Aiea, typical parent nights attract just a handful of people. For RAP, more than 400 people flocked to campus every other week this fall, from grandparents to babies.

"Since I came to RAP, I learned that reading is fun," declared 8-year-old Galaya Ching.

So far, the program has reached 150,000 adults and children at public elementary and middle schools in 10 years. Results of parent surveys to determine the long-term impact of RAP are overwhelmingly positive.

● 90 percent say their children like reading more and read better after RAP.

*continued on reverse side*

## Read Aloud America Tips

- Relax with your child in a cozy place.
  - Read from the heart; don't worry about your style.
  - Make it fun - not a lesson.
  - If your child does not like a book, try another.
  - Read aloud for 20 minutes several days a week.
  - Take your child to the library and get them their own library card.
- T-T-T-T (Turn off TV Through Thursday)



**Read Aloud America**  
Building Families of Lifetime Readers

# reading effort one for the books

Reading effort is one for the books

Home project generates debate in Hawaii Kai



Feds plan \$26 billion to salvage Citigroup

- 89 percent say they are more involved in their children's learning.
- 80 percent of adults say they are reading more themselves.
- 70 percent of families say they watch less TV as a result of RAP.

"Two and three years later, people have turned off the TV, they are spending time with their kids at the dinner table, they are going to the library," said Jed Gaines, Read Aloud America's founder and president. "This is a simple, nonthreatening program that shows parents just how much fun and how effective reading aloud is. It's changing lives."

Gaines approaches his mission like a game-show host, peppering his audience with jokes and flinging out Frisbees, with coupons good for new books. While the pizza and prizes help draw in the crowds, what sticks with people is the power of listening to meaningful stories, he said.

"It's kind of like a mental massage," said Adreana Reyes, a parent at Kualapuu Elementary on Molokai who brought along her daughters, ages 6 and 1. "It's so relaxing."

Reading aloud stimulates the imagination, builds vocabulary and encourages fledgling readers. It often gets parents and children to open up to each other. Lydia Trinidad, Kualapuu's principal, said the low-tech program generated "something that we miss a lot, which is family interaction."

"This provides a nice, safe alternative to a lot of the media most kids seem to be attracted to: video games, Ultimate Fighter and the R-rated movies that are in a lot of homes," she said.

Waimalu parent Maile Johnson said RAP has worked for her sons, ages 6 and 7.

"The boys weren't reading as often as they should, so we decided to turn off the TV," she said. "At first it was a little rough, but it's paid off. They'll read or play family games."

Her son, Isaiah, is matter-of-fact about it. "We don't get to watch TV until the weekends," he said, eagerly thumbing through a new book from the RAP table. "I got used to it."

In the cafeteria, Gaines warned up the crowd with softball questions. "What's the best deal in town?" he called out. Hands reach high, waving red cards emblazoned with a yellow hibiscus, a new possession for many of them: public library cards, available for free.

Rather than pushing the mechanics of reading, Gaines emphasizes the pleasure of hearing books. He had a hard time learning to read, struggling with dyslexia in a household with three TVs. When he had children of his own, he read to them from birth and was inspired to spread the word.

Even with lots of donations and volunteer readers, RAP is not cheap. The state Department of Human Services awarded Read Aloud America a \$700,000 contract this year with federal funds designed to strengthen families and promote positive youth development.

The money helps cover salaries and rent, books and other prizes, family reading handbooks and transport.

"We know that this is working," said department Director Lillian Koller. "It's not just something that our gut tells us is a good thing. We know we are making a sound investment. They're helping families and children learn the joy of reading, the joy of lifelong learning and exploration, the joy of family."

Parents at Kalihi Elementary raised \$6,000 to bring the program back for the fourth time next semester. With the state subsidy, the cost is cut to \$1,000 or less for some needy schools.

"I don't have any doubt that RAP has helped us improve test scores because of the parent involvement factor," said Kalihi Elementary Principal Natalie Muntakata. "This is one of the best ways to get parents involved."

Nancy Aloang can attest to that. She takes Alecander to the library all the time now and wishes she had known the power of reading to her older boys, Angelo and 18-year-old Andrew. "The youngest knows more than the other two combined when they were his age," she said.

"This is the first time I've attended a school-connected activity," she wrote on an evaluation form on her first night at RAP. "Where was this program 10 years ago?"

## RAP is headed to these schools next semester:

Aiea Elementary, Jarrett Middle School, Kalihi Elementary, Kamaile Elementary, Kaunakakai Elementary, Kihei Elementary, Kiloana Elementary, Makaha Elementary.



**Read Aloud America**

Building Families of Lifetime Readers

## why read aloud?

- Children and adults love hearing good stories
  - It strengthens family bonds
  - It builds vocabulary
- It motivates people to read on their own
  - It stretches attention spans
  - It stimulates the imagination
- It exposes people to new ideas and experiences

For more information, visit [ReadAloudAmerica.org](http://ReadAloudAmerica.org) or call 808. 531-1985.