Alumni Spotlight

This Fall semester we are featuring Marine Yanikian, one of our very first ReadersPlus program coordinators in our alumni spotlight. In fact, she was hired back in 1997 when we were named simply USC Readers, just months after the America Reads Challenge had been introduced and when only reading tutors were trained and placed at our (then) five schools. Two years later, the America Counts Initiative was introduced and we changed our name to reflect the addition of math tutoring to our program.

Marine has a unique story, as do all of our ReadersPlus alumni, but all have a few things in common. They seek out for meaningful work that will inspire them, they strive to gain positive learning experiences, and more often than not their work within K-5 schools helps inform them in their post-graduation career pursuits.

In the spirit of the holiday season, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all our reading and math tutors, program coordinators and central staff – whether they worked with us 20 years ago or are just completing their first semester with us this fall. It is such a joy to hear from alumni like Marine who share how they have gained as much as they have given through their experiences with USC ReadersPlus. I am honored to work with such inspired and inspiring students year after year. --Tina Koneazny, Associate Director

“In 1995, I graduated from John Marshall High School and applied to one university. It wasn’t the smartest of choices, but it definitely shaped the rest of my life. Fortunately, USC welcomed me into its fold. Like all freshmen, I wandered about my first year, wondering what I was supposed to do with the rest of my life. I accidentally stumbled into a class that had partnered with USC’s Joint Educational Project (JEP).

Volunteering at a local span school through (JEP) introduced me to the most rewarding of careers: teaching. Tina Koneazny fueled my passion for education when she offered me a position as the Program Coordinator at Foshay Learning Center through USC Readers, a program born just months before through President Clinton’s America Reads Initiative. While at Foshay, I guided fellow Trojans in creating a presence on the school site centered around reading and mentorship. The more I did, the further I wanted to dive into the field of education. I student taught my senior year and graduated in 1999 with a BA in English, a minor in Education, and a Multiple Subject/CLAD Teaching Credential.

Regardless of the grade, school, or demographic population I’ve served since 1999, I’ve supported students along their individual journeys. This last spring, I guided fifty eighth graders through my old romping ground. It was during this trip when I reconnected with Tina. I described to my kiddos the life changing impact USC, JEP, America Read’s and Ms. Tina Koneazny had on my life and thanked Tina for shaping my journey, in hopes that my students will learn to “fight on” with similar passion and determination. Currently, I am the College and Career Advisor at LAUSD’s Hubert Howe Bancroft Middle School and eagerly walk along my students’ paths as Tina did mine.” --Marine Yanikian, Alumni and Educator
Central Staff

Tina Konczak
Phebe Chew
Karla Davion-Rodriguez
Brittany Acevedo
Cecilia Nguyen

Coordinators

Sabrina Barrow
Carol Abrejan
So Dom Park
Emma Dessau
Nick Lopez
Michelle Strohecker
Stacey Law

Assistant Coordinators

Nina Moore
9vianna Law
Zoe Bautista
Gregory Gallegos
Sydney Horner

New Tutor Shoutouts

Foshay Learning Center
John Casey, Claribel Salazar, Amaya Simpson, Brandon Bruscato, Bryan Portillo, Ani Sarkisyan, Randy Hoang Ebony Gonzalez

Lenicia B. Weemes Elementary
Marissa Hansen
Betelhem Assefa
Cindy Andrade

Norwood Elementary
Alicia Adiwidjaja, Sara Sturek, Dana Sutherland-Ward, Hana Fransz-Myers, Waniso Dumbutshena-Berry, Erica Beckman, Collette Gordon, Nipun Wadhwa

32nd Street School
Aarohi Sheth, Andrea Serrano-Donato, Peter Park

Vermont Elementary
Keyrin Velasquez, Kay Marian Avery Graycochea

John Mack Elementary
Elon Mahone, Tonya Tang Juan Alvarado Cantu
The Challenge

“But I don’t want to read!” Most children have uttered these words at some point or another, perhaps more than once. Reading is not always comfortable; it pushes you, forces you to struggle across the terrain of unfamiliar words and unknown ideas. It often may not afford the ease of watching Netflix or playing a game on your iPhone. But through that struggle, a child will learn invaluable skills that could only be acquired through reading. “I don’t want to read” is a challenge, one that we accept every time we come to work. It is a challenge to break through that initial resistance and show every student the magic of reading. It is a challenge to make them embrace that struggle, and to see the great reward it will give them if they persevere. At ReadersPlus, I see students who jump out of their chairs excited to read when their tutors arrive. I love this job because I think that it can really make a difference. Even on a bad day, when you see those big smiles wanting to learn, it reminds you how much there is to work for.  --Zayn Razi, Tutor

From Rap Song Collaborations to Slime Parties

As program coordinator at Science Center, I like to encourage my tutors to work with one another and make joint lesson plans, or incorporate others into their lesson plan. I believe that ReadersPlus not only offers students an opportunity to receive one-on-one help from a tutor, but also allows for an opportunity to do activities students wouldn’t be able to do in the regular classroom. Over the semester, I’ve had students create rap songs to learn rhyming words, play hangman against another tutor and their student to practice spelling words, and have slime-making parties where they sit and talk about how tutoring and class work have been going. Aside from helping our students learn material in a new way, tutors are able to learn to work with one another and collaborate to make a lesson that will fit both students' needs and also teach them something new. Through lessons that feel like a game and working with students they wouldn’t have otherwise, collaborative lessons help students and tutors build positive relationships with one another!  --Carol Abrajan, Coordinator
John Mack Elementary

Mack Keeps Me Young
College is about growing up and preparing for adult life. And sometimes, growing up can be stressful. It’s easy to get caught up in the seriousness of day-to-day life. But, working with ReadersPlus has helped me stay in touch with my inner child. The students at Mack Elementary are great at making me laugh, keeping me grounded, and sharing their unique perspectives with me. When college is stressful, I have found my time at Mack to be a much-needed break from adult life and an opportunity to rediscover the imagination, curiosity, and enthusiasm that defined my childhood. My students remind me that is important to stay in touch with your childhood self. From reading The Giving Tree to The Rainbow Fish, my past year and a half working at Mack has brought me back to when I was a young reader. Getting to share these books and experiences with a new generation over the past year has given me so much joy. Whether it’s making slime or playing Uno, working with the students at Mack always puts a smile on my face.

--Erica Noll, Tutor

The Key to Success
The most crucial element for having successful lessons with your student is creating a positive learning environment. This was something I was not expecting when I started with ReadersPlus a couple semesters ago. I assumed the clarity of my explanations or the student’s willingness to engage with the material would be key component of a successful lesson. I soon came to find that no matter how prepared I was for a lesson, it would not turn out as expected unless I had invested time in building a relationship with my student. The student must believe that you are committed to their academic progress and you must trust that the student is truly giving their best effort to engage in the lesson you have tailored to their needs and interests. I found that one of the only ways to do this is to create an environment where the student is comfortable communicating with me. If I notice the student is having a hard time concentrating on the lesson, I ask if there was something they need rather than attempting to discipline them.

Since I began doing this, I find that my student will now tell me why she is not focused, and we do what we can to resolve the issue. We work as a team to ensure she is getting the most out of our time together. Learning how to create a positive learning environment is the single most important skill I have begun to develop through ReadersPlus. This is something that I know will prove to be useful if I decide to become a pediatric dentist in the near future.

--Emily Camacho, Tutor
Memorable Math Pumpkin Past Time
As a ReadersPlus math tutor, it's given me great experiences in lesson planning, that will help me for the future as a math high school teacher. Since math builds upon past topics, the math they learn now will be the foundation for my students' future math perspectives. Although I've met some challenges in keeping them engaged with lessons, the times I see and hear them have fun with math makes me feel accomplished. I've found great math activity ideas on Pinterest and other websites that capture my students' enthusiasm. I recently had a fun activity with one of my students where we cut out pumpkins and put two-digit addition problems behind each one. We each hid our set of pumpkins around the room and raced each other to see who could find them the fastest! After we found them, we solved each problem to practice their skill. Hearing the laughter from them as we went around the classroom trying to find the pumpkins was a really nice experience. I'm looking forward to new experiences I'll have with JEP ReadersPLUS!

--Cindy Andrade, Tutor

From Being a ReadersPlus Student to Being a Tutor
"Many years ago, while I was in elementary school, I had been a student who had a tutor from ReadersPlus, and I am forever grateful for the help they gave me back then. In my first semester at USC, I had known already that I wanted to work with ReadersPlus. One of my goals upon becoming a USC student was to give back to my community, and I knew that applying for ReadersPlus would be a good start. Having lived in this community for nineteen years, I know that there are a lot of students who were just like me, students who struggle in math and reading. And being given the opportunity to help those kids, makes me proud. The past three semesters of working with USC ReadersPlus has been such a great experience. I have gained a lot of knowledge from being a part of ReadersPlus, whether it's from working with the other staff on site or from working with the students."

--Dayanara Saucedo, Tutor

Foshay Learning Center
“So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”
I've answered this question in lots of different ways: “A princess!” “An astronaut!” “An architect!” “An engineer!” But there's one response that I always seem to come back to: “A teacher.” Although I decided to study engineering in college, working with ReadersPlus has allowed me to see that teaching really is my true passion. I love helping my students learn to love reading and seeing the progress they make over even just one semester. Working at ASP has also allowed me to practice classroom management skills with larger groups of students. I'm so thankful for these opportunities to serve and learn with kids in my USC neighborhood, and it's something I could see myself doing for many years in the future. My teachers in elementary and middle school shared with me their love of learning and gave me a strong foundation in math, language, and the arts, and I want to be able to do that for the next generation of students.

--Carolyn Scott, Tutor
32nd Street School

Tailoring a Lesson to a Student’s Needs

Throughout my three semesters at ReadersPlus, I have gotten the chance to work with a variety of students in different grades. What I have learned the most from this experience is how important it is to create lessons that really attend to a student’s interests and needs. Providing these kids individual, focused attention really allows them to succeed. As a math tutor, a lot of my students tell me that they do not like math because they think it is hard and they do not understand it. By creating lessons that mirror their interests, my students become a lot more enthusiastic about math and are more willing to learn new topics. Lesson plans that match student’s personalities, incorporate their learning styles, and set attainable goals help students build confidence in their math skills and enhance engagement. Creative lesson planning has definitely allowed some of my students who are shy to be comfortable asking me questions and to explain to me why they struggle with certain concepts in class. Listening to the students allows me to continue adapting my lesson plans and helps me become a better mentor. --Sophie Lopez, Tutor

Norwood Elementary

Real World Lessons from The Lorax

Daisy, one of my first grade students, has always been able to point out whether what we are reading is nonfiction or fiction. Specifically, when reading The Cat in The Hat, Daisy would say “Hey, why is the cat balancing a birthday cake on a fishbowl? That can’t actually happen!” Because of Daisy’s awareness of the world she interacts with I thought The Lorax might challenge her. Because it is a Dr. Seuss story, she automatically assumed there would be nothing "real" about it. However with the help of guided questions such as “Why do you think trees are important?” and “What do you think happens to the animals when trees are cut down?”, Daisy was able to understand that although ba-bah-loots don’t exist, fish do and in our own environment we face pollution. After our reading, I found it super helpful to take a stroll outside and encourage her to identify plants, listen for birds, and notice the bark on a beautiful tree. We also drew Truffula trees with chalk and with every tree we hopped to I would ask her to define the vocabulary we went over. I have learned that students enjoy learning when you are able to apply real world facts and issues to the lessons!

--Sara Sturek, Tutor
Vermont Elementary School

Sophia (8)
What is your favorite part of ReadersPlus?
"I get to learn new words and I get better at reading!"
What is your favorite activity you’ve done at ReadersPlus?
"When we were playing with our Play Doh and making our gingerbread girl."
What is your favorite book we read?
"The Gingerman Bread!"
How has ReadersPLUS helped you in class?
"This program helps me read more and read faster."
What is your favorite activity outside of class?
"I like to play with my friends. We play zombies, clowns, and hide-and-go-seek."

Josue (6)
What is your favorite part of ReadersPlus?
"I really liked playing games after reading the books."
What is your favorite activity you’ve done at ReadersPLUS?
"I liked making the 'All About Me poster' and making objects using Play Doh to represent the new words I learned."
What is your favorite book we read?
"Christmas is Coming!"
How has ReadersPLUS helped you in class?
"This program helps me read better."
What is your favorite activity outside of class?
"I like to play video games like Minecraft and Sonic."

Chantal (6)
What is your favorite part of ReadersPlus?
"I like to practice reading a lot and it makes me happy."
What is your favorite activity you’ve done at ReadersPLUS?
"Drawing the turkey in celebration of the Thanksgiving holiday."
What is your favorite book we read?
"Smiley Shark!"
How has ReadersPLUS helped you in class?
"I learned new words and am becoming a better reader!"
What is your favorite activity outside of class?
"I like to draw and play games with my friends."
Program Highlights

Little Yoginis

Thanks to the generous gift last spring from our good friend and USC alumna, Teresa Powers, the Little Yoginis curriculum is now being taught after school at all seven of our ReadersPlus partner schools. This is the first semester that all of our schools have enjoyed the benefits of our yoga curriculum, and we are so happy to share these photos and post-lesson reflections from two of our USC Yogi instructors:

Brittany Acevedo, former tutor at 32nd Street School and Program Coordinator at Weemes Elementary; now graduate student in the Rossier School and trained USC Yogi placed at Norwood Elementary School:

“Many students shared that after their first yoga lesson, they were showing other students in their class yoga poses during recess.”

“This past week was very heartwarming because all tutors were doing the poses with us and even some of the mentors of Norwood’s after school program joined in on the poses as well, so the students really enjoyed watching all adults be enthusiastic and involved. It made a huge difference.”

“At the end of each lesson, I like asking the students what their favorite pose of the day was, and I love hearing their answers; some favorites are downward dog (a popular one), warrior II, and the whole process of savasana.”

Carol Abrajan, trained USC Yogi and Program Coordinator at Alexander Science Center:

“One boy, Leo, was so excited and attentive to the yoga poses we were showing him. He would do the pose, ask us to look at him to make sure he had done it right,

then would sit quietly at the top of his mat while we attended to other students and moved on to the next pose.”

“The children seemed to be super engaged with this story (The Rhino Who Swallowed the Storm by LaVar Burton). They were even able to make some of the connections from the reading to our poses or our breathing techniques.”

“Before going into the Warrior poses, I related how when we stand in our poses we show our strength and bravery, and asked the kids to name people who they thought were brave. I got answers from Rosa Parks, to their moms and dads, and a couple even said me (I was honored)!”

--Tina Koneazny, Associate Director
Program Highlights and Love Shoutouts

**USC JEP WonderKids**

This semester, USC JEP WonderKids partnered with the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center to design a Cancer Education Initiative focused on the science and biology of cancer, to be introduced in our ReadersPlus programs after school.

This fall, WonderKids was presented at Foshay Learning Center and 32nd Street/USC Visual and Performing Arts Magnet. Students were able explore more fields related to cancer, such as, immunology, microbiology, laboratory science, and pharmacology.

Some of the activities included: measuring volume and mass, learning how to use a microscope, understanding the immune system, creating prescriptions, and building model bacteria. Additionally, one lesson in each science field block is presented by guest speakers to share more about their work, to engage children in fun and exciting science activities, and to answer any lingering questions children may have about their work in the field. Martin Kast (Professor, USC Keck Cancer Research), Joey Skeate (PhD, USC Keck Cancer Research), Charles Nicolet (Research Associate, Keck Farnham Lab), Anna Puskin (PhD, Neuroscience), Samantha Betts (PhD, Neuroscience), Julia Juliano (PhD, Neuroscience), and Kyla Kelly (PhD, Marine Environmental Biology) are a few guest speakers who shared their content knowledge and research with the students this past fall.

This is my fourth year working with Wonderkids and I have co-taught over 60 different lesson plans. Students are constantly engaged and always excited to tackle a new field of science. Most importantly, all students are overflowing with joy while participating in experiments and countless students have already expressed their interest in a career in science.

--Brittany Acevedo, Master of Arts in Teaching

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**Love Shoutouts from Fellow ReadersPlus Fam Bam**

**Kiara**
Kiara is our Central Office rock - she is calm, cool and collected and keeps us all on point!

**Victoria**
She has been very nice and supportive this semester.

**Carol**
Kindness; She is amazing

**Phebe**
For being our in-house astrologer and keeping us grounded when things seem crazy!

**Stacey**
Stacey is just amazing and wonderful!! Stacy was always kind and understanding, she always had a smile on her face and is absolutely adorable

**So Dam**
Always bringing yummy food (like dried mango slices) to the Vermont staff meetings!!! She was very kind to me

**Dominique**
Dominique has made me feel supported and kept me sane on site!! Especially when I was feeling unmotivated. What a cutie—I love her.

**Sabrina**
Sabrina has been a wonderful coordinator and has really glad our site up! I have loved working with you and look forward to next semester with you!

**Aina**
“She was the best bth”
Yelp Reviews

Name: Ebony Gonzalez (Tutor)
Rating: 5/5
Comments: The Readers Plus program has been great so far. I am currently a literacy tutor for Foshay and I’ve had an amazing experience with both my students and coworkers. Readers Plus really makes sure that tutors always feel supported and never feel like they can’t reach out if they need help or someone to talk to. They take the quality of the program very seriously, and provide lots of resources if you ever find yourself needing assistance. Aside from that, it really is such a great choice if you’re considering applying because the job is really just to reach out to the kids in the community. You get paid to be a mentor/tutor to some amazing students with so much potential, and what’s better than that? I’ll definitely be returning next semester because of how much I enjoyed it.

Name: Ms. Loom (4th grade teacher)
Rating: 5/5 stars
Comments: Our students were given the attention and support they needed in English Language Arts. Thank you!

Name: Ms. Sanchez (5th grade teacher)
Rating: 5/5 stars
Comments: My students benefited from working one-on-one with a USC Reader. My students have shown motivation in reading and comprehension. Thank you!

Name: Melissa Noj (student)
Rating: 5/5 stars
Comments: I filled in all the stars because I like tutoring. The reason I like it is because it helps me on the thing I need help on like reading and all my tutoring are nice and fun.

Name: Mr. Nakama (teacher)
Rating: 6/5
Comments: -Readers’ Plus is a great program! I’m glad many of my students had the chance to participate and improve their critical thinking.
-Readers Plus has helped some of my struggling students catch up.
-The Readers Plus program is very helpful for students who are struggling with their reading and writing.
-The Readers Plus program is great for helping students improve the skill necessary for school.

Name: Kadest Abraha (student)
Rating: 4/5 stars
Comments: I like ReadersPLUS because it’s cool and my tutor Breana is really fun and there is a lot of fun stuff here like the books and the fun hangmans and stuff. I also like on Halloween when the boss gave us candy bag on Monday. That’s why I love ReadersPLUS!

Name: Robert Wood (student)
Rating: 5/5 stars
Comments: cool

Name: Mrs. Rhonda Ramirez (teacher)
Rating: 4/5 stars
Comments: I am always grateful for the extra help the USC Readers provide my students year after year.

Name: Mrs. Mora (teacher)
Rating: 4/5 stars
Comments: The USC Readers program does a great job working with our students and helping them review concepts they may be having trouble with in class. It really helps them and they enjoy developing a friendship with their USC Teachers.

Name: Anonymous Student from Weemes
Rating: 5/5
Comments: USC students help you in math and other stuff. This is why I rate it 5 stars.

Name: Amanda Vasquez (student)
Rating: 5/5 stars
Comments: My tutor is the best and we do fun stuff.

Name: Mrs. Castro (Teacher)
Rating: 5/5
Comments: I really appreciate your (Olivia Dang) help. I have seen an improvement in my students reading. Thank you for your help and dedication.

Name: Herman Vasquez (student)
Rating: 5/5 stars
Comments: I like this program because you get to read and get prizes.

Name: Jesus Lopez (student)
Rating: 5/5
Comments: I give Haben and Readers 6 stars because we do, since we read and we have amazing times. We laugh a lot.

Name: Ms. Wong (5th grade Teacher—32nd)
Rating: 5/5
Comments: USC ReadersPlus has been an asset to our students. There are clear expectations of what is covered and communication is ongoing. The mentors have always been professional and responsible. Not only do they “tutor” but they’re positive role models.
Fun Page: Superlatives+More

Most likely to build a proper tent for 32nd Street: Sabrina Barrow

Most likely to win in ASP 5th Grade Kickball: Dylan Thomas

Most likely to end up being a teacher on site in the future: Brittany Acevedo

Best swaggy attire/attitude: Erica Noll

Most flexible and Tina like: Carol Abrajan

Best Children Whisperer: Natalia Wurst

Most Likely to quietly take over the world: Dayanara Saucedo

Most likely to dance in a Beyoncé music video: Nipun Wadhwa

Most Likely to die in the Hunger Games for a silly reason: Breana Davidson

Best Equipped to be a T. rex’s vegetarian cousin: Zayn Razi

Funnier than the movies “Mean Girls,” “Girls Trip,” and “White Chicks” Combined: Nick Lopez

Best/Hottest Tea to Spill: Sydney Horner

Most likely to be the “Mom” or “Dad” of the group: Emma Dessau

Most likely to go viral on USC’s meme page: Zoe Bautista

Just for Fun

Why do plants hate math?

Because it gives them square roots.

ENGLISH IS A DIFFICULT LANGUAGE. IT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD THROUGH THOROUGH THOUGHT, THOUGH.
About Us

USC ReadersPlus is an “America Reads/America Counts” literacy and math tutoring program housed within the USC Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences.

In 1997, President Clinton launched legislation that would provide additional work-study money to colleges and universities with the condition that a large portion of it go to one-on-one literacy programs for children grade K-6. The JEP version of America Reads was the first in the nation to begin working under these guidelines, launching in May 19, 1997. In May of 1999, America Counts was added to include math education and it was at this time that the USC Readers program was changed to USC ReadersPlus.

The Program is administered by the Joint Educational Project and funded in part through the USC Good Neighbor’s Campaign with the support of the USC Financial Aid Office. Our tutors work with seven of the “Family of Schools” surrounding USC.

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