

Newspaper wants new readers — literally

EL PASO (AP) — Jay Ambrose, whose mother instilled in him a passion for books, is editor of the afternoon newspaper in this border city, where some figures show a fifth of the adult population can't read.

Ambrose and the *El Paso Herald-Post* have cheerfully declared war on illiteracy. The strategy is straightforward.

"Our goal is to put together the most ambitious literacy program in the United States," he said.

The *Herald-Post* isn't alone among newspapers in its endeavor.

More than 700 newspapers nationwide are involved in promoting literacy, although most aim their efforts at children, said Linda Skover, assistant director of the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, which oversees the 30-year-old Newspapers in Education program.

However, the *Herald-Post* is targeting all ages in El Paso and has enlisted the help of community groups, businesses and individuals in a campaign that includes:

- A weekly literacy column by *Herald-Post* education reporter E. Patrick McQuaid.

- A daily cartoon strip prepared by a psychologist from the University of Texas-El Paso designed to help parents teach pre-schoolers how to read.

- Columns by a reading instructor at El Paso Community College on how to be a literacy tutor.

- A regular feature on new books available at the library.

The newspaper has sponsored

a contest that challenged children to read 100 books during the school year and held a "Reading Day in the Park," with storytellers entertaining children and adults who then spent the day stretched out on blankets reading.

Together with Hispanic organizations and El Paso Community College, the newspaper formed a committee that arranged the donation by New York publishers of 200,000 unsold books that would otherwise have been burned.

A local family has donated

"Our goal is to put together the most ambitious literacy program in the United States."

— Jay Ambrose, editor of the *El Paso Herald-Post*.

warehouse space to store the books, said Kay Taggart, the literacy program coordinator whose salary comes from a \$40,000 fund established by Scripps Howard, the *Herald-Post's* parent company, specifically for the newspaper's campaign.

In one of its latest projects, the *Herald-Post* has established the El Paso Business Consortium for Literacy, where representatives of 25 businesses have jumped on the bandwagon to support the literacy campaign.

Projects in the planning stage include helping youngsters on prob-

ation learn to read and linking children and an elderly people in retirement homes, said Ambrose.

Figures on the rate of illiteracy vary, depending on who's counting and how they define the problem.

The 1980 Census showed El Paso's population of 470,000 included 106,115 adults who are functionally illiterate. The Census Bureau defines as illiterate persons who haven't gone beyond an eighth-grade education.

Deborah Stedman, with the Governor's Task Force on Adult Literacy, said a federally funded study conducted at the University of Texas in Austin in 1975 took a different approach.

"They looked at the requirements on an adult in our society: could they fill out a job application, could they come up with a decent, balanced diet, did they know their rights if arrested," she said. "Just bits and pieces of literacy, applying basic skills to living in society."

Even so, the figures were sobering. Nationally, 19.7 percent of people age 18 or older were functionally illiterate. The figure for Texas was 21.3 percent, and 24.1 percent for El Paso, she said.

"There's also a vicious cycle of illiteracy — children of adult illiterates are often illiterate themselves," said Stedman. "Working with parents is a very effective way to break the cycle."

Ambrose, whose mother has given his own children books "all her life," said he's aware of how difficult it is to make children learn to love reading.

White welcomes elderly legislators

AUSTIN (AP) — Gov. Mark White welcomed newly elected members of the Silver-Haired Legislature Thursday by promising that the concerns of elderly Texans will be heard by the 1987 Legislature.

"Senior Texans will now have the opportunity to establish legislative priorities for Texas lawmakers to consider in January," White told a news conference.

He received a list of the 116 members of the non-partisan organization of Texans 60 years of age and older from Harriet Griffin of Fort Worth, chairman of the steering committee.

The Silver-Haired Legislature was created by a resolution of the 1985 Legislature. On May 30, about 150,000 older Texans elected the 116 representatives from 28 districts over the state.

On Sept. 29, the mock Legislature will be convened in the Capitol by White for three days of committee hearings and debate before selecting the issues they think should have priority in 1987.

A training session for the 116 representatives will be held in July by Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby.

White said Thursday, "I am pleased that Texas has joined a list of 22 other states in sponsoring such a program."

"Some might ask why the Silver-Haired Legislature was created. For too many years, there was no forum

for senior Texans to discuss issues that concern them and no avenue in which to present their concerns to the regular legislature.

"Senior Texans represent a vast, untapped reserve of knowledge and experience, and their numbers are growing."

The governor said that in other states with a similar program, 70 percent of the ideas that came out of Silver-Haired Legislatures have become law. In Arkansas, 90 percent of the proposals later became law, he said.

"There is an impressive group coming to Austin," White said, giving as examples the election of a former state representative, two retired judges and three retired educators.

Although created by the 1985 Legislature, the Silver-Haired Legislature was provided no state money. White said hundreds of volunteers in business, government and civic affairs have donated their time to provide coordinating efforts and technical assistance.

"Senior Texans now have a chance to gain understanding of the legislative process through direct involvement," White said. "And because of their advocacy experience with the Silver-Haired legislators, they will offer informed assistance to policymakers here in Austin and in their own communities."

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