

Better literacy opens the book to a whole new world of writing

BY AUDREY TEMPÉLSMAN

At the sound of his name, Omar Amparo, 24, rose to his feet and walked to the podium, his heart pounding. Daring a glimpse at the crowd gathered at Our Lady of Pompei Church for the annual Literacy Partners Student and Volunteer Recognition Celebration, he saw hundreds of unfamiliar faces staring back at him expectantly.

For a moment, he was convinced that he couldn't do it, that the words of his essay, each carefully, painstakingly chosen would stick in his throat.

Then, he lifted up the piece of paper he'd brought with him to the front of the stage, took a breath and began to read.

"Living in a world where everything is always moving; living in a place where everyone barely sleeps and noise is as abundant as there are people in China; it's nearly impossible to stop, catch your breathe, and notice the sun tapping on your shoulders," he began.

Minutes later, it was over and Amparo beelined back to his seat, forgetting to accept the gift presented by Literacy Partners in acknowledgement of his success in their General Equivalency Diploma program: A pair of marble bookends inscribed with his name.

This day, Amparo said in an interview a few weeks later, had been the most terrifying — and wonderful — of his life.

According to Literacy Partners' Web site, 36 percent of New York City adults read at or below a fifth-grade level. Nearly half of these individuals live in poverty.

For 30 years, the nonprofit organization has addressed this citywide crisis by providing free literacy programs to men and women over 16 years old.

"Our mission is to help adults acquire the reading, writing and basic skills they need to participate as a community member, to help their kids in school, to support their family, and to become employed at a level where they can receive benefits and be self-supporting," said Susan McLean, executive director of Literacy Partners.

"We come into a time where you need a piece of paper that said you've done your schooling. A lot of jobs I can't get without my GED," said Amparo, who enrolled in Literacy Partners' pre-GED class last fall and was transferred to the more advanced GED program shortly afterward.

Amparo grew up in the Bronx and attended Christopher Columbus High School, a public school in the borough's northeast area. During his sophomore year, his mother, Rosa, became gravely ill and was hospitalized.

At 17, Amparo suddenly needed to support his mother and 12-year-old brother, Hector.

Though his mother had always "pushed education hard," Amparo was unable to juggle school and his new responsibilities.

"My mind was always on work, money, rent. I really couldn't finish," he said.

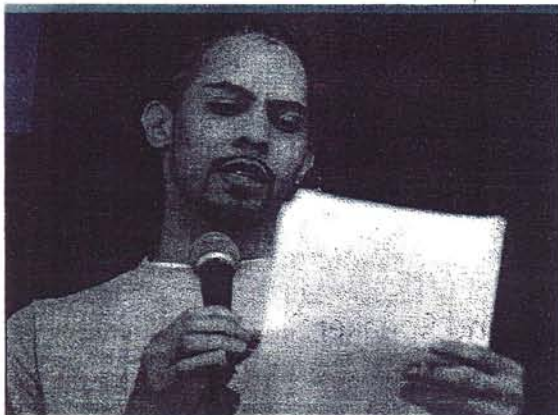
He dropped out of school and began working at a carpet store to make ends meet.

After several years of illness, Rosa's health finally improved. Shortly afterward, the family moved to the Lower East Side.

The move, Amparo said, has been a learning experience: "In the Bronx, the neighborhood was mostly black, mostly Hispanic. Here, there's no one opinion, no one voice. Everyone has something to do, something to bring to the table. It's made me open to more things."

Months after moving to the Lower East Side, Rosa discovered Literacy Partners, and began taking pre-GED classes. She quickly felt at home in the community.

"She's a great woman," said Cody Keffer, head of the Literacy Partners pre-



Omar Amparo reading his essay "The Park" at Literacy Partners' Student and Volunteer Recognition Celebration.

GED center where Rosa takes her classes.

Her enthusiasm soon sparked her son's curiosity.

"She'd come home and tell me about the environment and everybody. She said everyone was cool. So I decided to go too," said Amparo.

While working at a gym in his neighborhood, Amparo attended Pre-GED classes from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., two days a week, using his spare time to study.

"At first, I didn't think it would be special," he said. "I thought it would be a regular school, where you just go and sit there. But the students really interact with the teachers. And most of the teachers are students, too. And you feel like as much as they can teach us, we can teach them."

It was at these classes that Amparo met Sara Eckel, a freelance writer from Brooklyn, who has taught writing at Keffer's Pre-GED Thursday evening class since last fall.

For Eckel, volunteering with the organization has been a life-changing experience.

"When you teach adults, the students are just incredibly focused," she said. "They're very eager to be there and very receptive to whatever you have to offer them. You ask them what the difference between an adjective and an adverb is, and they're just dying to know."

"You don't even realize what a treasure you have, just knowing basic parts of speech," she continued.

In the class environment, Amparo was an earnest and attentive student. But it was his writing that really set him apart.

"When Omar started writing, that was really exciting for me: it seemed to really open something up in him," she said.

Even after Amparo was moved to the more advanced GED program, he and Eckel continued working together for 20 or 30 minutes after the end of their respective classes.

Eckel described Amparo's work as both joyful and poetic.

"He likes to write about things he loves," she said. Together, they tackled essays on cereal, the Super Bowl and, most recently, his recognized essay "The Park."

"Sara, she really pushed me. I gave her ideas and she really came back with positive words," Amparo said of his teacher.

essay, wanting it to be perfect for the event. Eckel recalled meeting with him two weeks before the reading: "He had papers spread all across the table, all the various revisions. He was working incredibly hard."

Finally, the day approached, and Amparo found himself on stage staring out at a sea of strangers. Because his grandfather was in the hospital, Amparo's family could not attend, so he tried desperately to locate his teacher.

"I looked out and I didn't see Sara's face. And I thought, 'I need you here, you're the one that got me into this!'" But even without her in his sight, Amparo read his piece. In his memory, he mumbled and stumbled over his words. But in the memories of others, it was a success, both for Amparo and for the organization.

"From Omar, other students can understand that reading is a process, writing is a process. And, if they dedicate themselves to it, they will meet their own personal goals," said McLean.

When Amparo came down from the stage at the end of the ceremony, Eckel, who'd been there all along, was the first to offer her congratulations.

"That whole day from start to end was just amazing," Amparo said. I was afraid, I was nervous, at some times I wanted to cry. But when I got off the stage, people came up to tell me, 'Great essay.' They were really crowing about things that I wrote, people I didn't even know. I just couldn't believe it.

"Now, I can keep reminding myself: 'I'm a good writer. I'm a good writer. I'm a good writer.'"