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Día Initiative Extends Its Literacy Outreach

By Sally Lodge | Apr 05, 2012

Founded in 1996 by poet and children's book author Pat Mora, El día de los niños/el día de los libros (Children's Day/Book Day) was inspired by the Mexican tradition of celebrating El día del niño, or the Day of the Child, on April 30. After

learning about that annual commemoration, Mora decided to combine the idea of honoring children with literacy advocacy, a subject she is passionate about. She created Día, now a year-long, family literacy initiative based at the ALA's Association of Library Services to Children.



"I really felt like I got tapped on the head with this idea," says Mora of the genesis of Día. "I heard about El día del niño while I was being interviewed for a public radio program at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1996. Even though I grew up in El Paso, on the Mexican border, I'd never heard of that tradition. I thought, 'Aha!' What if we link a celebration of children with literacy, an issue central to the well-being of children? I was fairly new to children's book publishing at the time, but was aware of how many families in this country don't have books and don't read."

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Mora moved quickly to get others on board, including her friend Oralia Garza de Cortés, a Texan librarian who at that time was chair of the children's committee of REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking. "Oralia shared information about the Día concept with REFORMA members nationally, and in February 1997, the organization voted to endorse the initiative and became my founding partner," Mora says.

Though initially conceived of as a one-day, annual celebration on April 30, Día has grown into a year-long outreach that encourages libraries to hold events. In 2004, the ALA acquired the trademark for Día from Mora, who says that to date 332 librarians have registered events on the ALSC's Día Web site, and that many others hold events without

officially registering. "So many librarians are not only committed but overcommitted," says Mora. "They are always scrambling, even after hours, and it's all fueled by their deep belief that kids and books belong together." The ALSC Web site offers a Día booklist brochure suggesting titles available in several languages, resource Web sites, and a guide for librarians interested in planning Día celebrations.

To spread word of the Día initiative, Mora three years ago launched DÍAPALOOZA, a month-long blog that runs each April on her Web site. New this year is the Día Author and

Illustrator Ambassadors project, through which children's book creators commit to taking at least two advocacy actions each year, including publicizing Día on their own Web sites, blogs, or through social media; talking to their publishers about staging a Día promotion; or submitting a video showing them reading their books aloud. Among the 25 authors and illustrators who have already signed on are George Ancona, Cynthia Leitch Smith, Monica Brown, and Lulu Delacre.

Mora touted the literacy initiative in her 2009 bilingual picture book, *Book Fiesta! Celebrate Children's Day/Book Day! Celebremos el día de los niños*, illustrated by Rafael López and published by HarperCollins/Rayo. She currently has several children's book projects in the works, including two under contract with Knopf: *The Beautiful Lady: Our Lady of Guadalupe* and the tentatively titled *I Pledge Allegiance*, the latter written with her daughter, Libby Martinez. This month, she will keep busy attending Día celebrations, among them one at Houston's Discovery Green park on April 21, and two at El Paso elementary schools on April 30.

The Día effort, says Mora, "falls under the big umbrella of what I call 'bookjoy.' Sometimes when I say that word, people will immediately smile, knowing the private pleasure of that time of the day when they are alone with their book. That is a very happy time for me, and those of us lucky enough to be readers want to share that joy of reading. I call Día an easy bridge to that."