



FOCAL Points ~ ~



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FOCAL AWARD LUNCHEON DECEMBER 2015

Text and photos by Caroline Arnold

On Saturday, December 12th, I attended the annual gala luncheon that honors the winner of the **FOCAL Award**. FOCAL (Friends of Children and Literature) is the support group of the Children's Literature Department of the Los Angeles Public Library. The award is presented annually to a children's book with California content. This year it went to ***Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight For Desegregation*** by Duncan Tonatiuh, published by Abrams, 2014.



Usually the author of the winning book gives a speech at the luncheon. This year, however, Duncan Tonatiuh was unable to attend. Instead, he sent a video of his acceptance, so we got to meet him virtually. His charming young daughter was also part of the video. And, while we were not able to meet the author, it was a special treat to be able to meet Sylvia Mendez, the subject of the book, who came to the luncheon. She was delightful and enjoyed interacting with all of the guests.



Every year at the luncheon, winners are presented with a unique puppet representing a character from their award-winning book. Jesse Kingsley, the puppeteer, used Duncan's illustrations as inspiration for his puppet of Sylvia.

For many years the puppets for the FOCAL winners were created by Carol Onofrio. Another special treat at this year's luncheon was the wonderful new book with photographs of all Carol's puppets and their stories. The book, *Storybook Puppets*, originally created by Carol Onofrio's family as a memorial to her body of work, is available in the shop at the Central Library.

Also present at the awards luncheon were children who won the FOCAL essay contest, along with their teachers, and parents. Each of the children read their essay aloud and told about a favorite part of the book and why they would like to meet the author.

Many people contributed to the success of the luncheon: the officers of FOCAL; the hardworking FOCAL award committee, whose difficult job it is to choose a winner; LAPL children's librarians; the middle school art students and their teacher, Ray Moscowicz, who created the wonderful centerpieces for the tables; and the parents and teachers who encouraged the students to write their wonderful essays. I always enjoy going to the luncheon and helping to celebrate the love for books and reading.



Thanks to everyone for making it such a festive occasion!

Separate Is Never Equal

By Duncan Tonatiuh

While reading **Separate is Never Equal**, my reaction to this book was sadness. I felt sad because of the suffering and humiliation that these kids were going through because they were Mexican. I also thought about my sister and I and how we could have been those kids because we are Mexican. Our parents and many of our other relatives are from Mexico.

The character that stuck with me was Sylvia. When she arrived at the new school, she was excited about attending there and being treated like everyone else. Unfortunately she was not allowed to attend the school because of her background. That saddened my heart because the color of my skin should NOT be a reason for people to treat me differently. At the same time, I feel grateful to the Mendez family for fighting for my rights to attend my current school, Vintage Magnet. I have many friends with different backgrounds and heritages. We all have the same opportunities and are treated equally.

Meeting the author of this amazing story would give me the opportunity to thank him for writing this book. This book is a reminder to me of all the brave people who risked their lives fighting for the rights of kids like me. I would also tell Mr. Tonatiuh that this story gives courage to stand up for myself and to be proud of my skin color, my Mexican heritage, who I am, and who I want to be when I grow up.

Fernanda Pereyra, Grade 4 Vintage Magnet

The book **Separate Is Never Equal** by Duncan Tonatiuh, gave me many reactions. I was not surprised that this was an issue because if there was a nationwide problem for African Americans, there's a high chance that there was also a problem for Mexican Americans. A couple of my friends are Mexican and they were surprised about the lies the superintendent told to the judge, such as the lie about some Mexicans not knowing English by just talking to them, not testing their skills. Also social behavior was addressed quoting that 75 percent of Mexican children had personal hygiene problems. The bottom line was that the Mexican students faced discrimination because they were considered inferior to white students. I was surprised that it took a judge a year to make his decision about the Mendez family and how quickly the school board appealed the case.

The scene that stuck with me is when Sylvia is looking for her locker when a white boy yells at her, "Go back to Mexican school!" That bothered me because no one has the right to say that even with Amendment 1, Freedom of Speech. As a young kid, I can't talk to anyone that way. I wonder where discrimination is learned.

I would like to meet the author, Duncan Tonatiuh, to ask a few questions. First, how did you find all the details about the Mendez case? Second, how do you feel about segregation in America today? Third, how do you feel about being recognized by FOCAL, an organization that seeks out the best in children's literature? Fourth, I am always interested in the artwork and why you had the pictures overlapping one another? Finally, do you have a new book coming out and what will be the subject?

Dennis Kogan, Grade 5 Welby Way ES

I didn't know until I read the book **Separate Is Never Equal** that Latin American families could not send their kids to neighborhood schools in Orange County, California. By the end of the story I understood how the Mendez family felt and why they weren't going to give up on their children's education

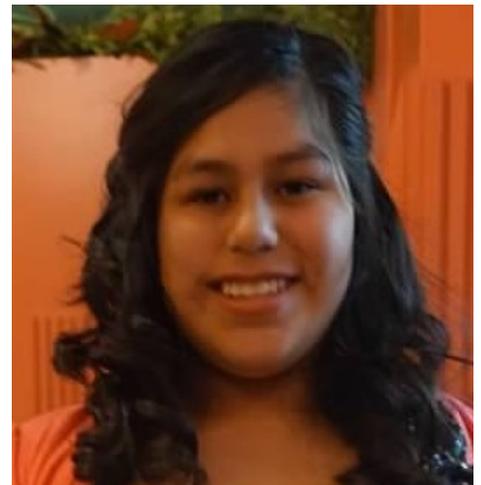
While I read the book, I thought of myself in Sylvia's position. I was sad when I read all of the things they had to go through and all of the things that they had to hear. By the end of the story, I was so happy that everything went the way it should and that they won the case.

One of the lessons that book teaches is that every person doesn't have to be the same, but every person is entitled to basic rights and human dignity. Every child also deserves an education. The books teaches us that children from different cultures should be in the same school so they can learn about each other and from each other. That is what makes America a better place.

The other lesson the book teaches is that you can handle anything. You should not give up or give in. You should work to make it better. If I were able to meet the author I would tell him how much I liked the book and that I hope he would write more stories like this one. I would let him know that when I had children, I would make sure that they read this book.

If I had the chance to meet Sylvia, I would say thank you for all you did to help the children of your time and of the future.

Britney Alaniz, Grade 7 Children of Promise Preparatory Academy



RON BROOKS: STORIES TO ILLUSTRATION

Be sure to mark your calendars for Saturday, February 6, from 1-3 p.m. The Art Department will present a workshop on the art of the book and introduce Ron Brooks' award-winning illustrated children's books from the collections of the Art and Children's Literature Departments. The event will be in Meeting Room A on the first floor.

STORYBOOK PUPPETS

Inspired by a scrapbook compiled by Carol Onofrio's niece, this pictorial history of the FOCAL Awards provides a survey of the best children's books about California. It is a visual treat for children, teachers, and lovers of children's literature. Carol created memorable puppets for each of the award-winning authors, and a duplicate for the Children's Literature Department. The puppets are on display right now at Central Library, and the book will soon be available online from the Library Store.

Production of the book was truly a group effort. FOCAL volunteers were encouraged and helped by all of the staff in Children's Literature Department. Louisa took professional quality photos, and Maritza marshaled the clerical staff to retrieve books and puppets from storage and back again. The text was written by Mara, Diane Olivo-Posner of Children's Services, Helene and Renny. Assisted by Mara and Madeline, we all proof-read the whole book three times. We were directed by volunteer Amy Inouye, who is a professional book designer. We are so lucky to have had her experienced and talented guidance. Check out this book the next time you are at the library.



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