

**Dallas Altrusa/USO/United  
Through Reading Initiative**

**Nomination for Letha H. Brown Literacy Award**

**May 25, 2008**

**Altrusa International Inc. of Downtown Dallas  
9048 Royal Crown  
Dallas, Texas 75243  
USA**

**District Nine**

**Altrusa International, Inc**

**Letha H. Brown Award**

**Entry Form**

**District Nine**

**Name of Club: Altrusa International Inc of Downtown Dallas**

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**City: Dallas**

**State: Texas**

**Country: USA**

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**Date: May 25, 2008**

**Project: Dallas Altrusa/USO/United Through Reading Initiative**

The Club sponsored an initiative to support the United Through Reading Program conducted by the USO at the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. This Program enables servicemembers to share their love of reading with children they leave behind by sending each one a DVD of the servicemember reading from a special book the servicemember has selected for the child from the USO's reading room, plus the book. This helps servicemembers stay connected to family, who can repeatedly replay the DVD while reading along from the book, thus modeling and reinforcing the value of reading. The child's guardian is encouraged to send the servicemember a return DVD recording the child's pleasure at reading the book, further enhancing family connectedness and support of reading. The Program was developed by the nonprofit organization, United Through Reading, which is affiliated with the World Literacy Foundation. The Dallas USO reading room is one of 34 sponsored jointly by the USO and United Through Reading worldwide.

The Club collected and donated books and \$2000 to purchase additional books and materials for the Dallas Program, wrote notes of gratitude and provided sweets for servicemembers departing for the Middle East, and helped servicemembers select books and record their DVDs on Make a Difference Day 2008.

The Service Committee brainstormed ideas for Make a Difference Day that would enable 100% Club participation and support literacy and our Club's Service Identity: "Educating Families for a Better Future". This project was triggered by a newspaper article touting the Program and soliciting support. The Committee recommended the project, and the Club approved it, because it met our MADD

criteria and had the added benefit of supporting our troops – who members widely feel need the nation's support.

The project concept was decided upon at a Service Committee meeting. Additional research into feasibility and specific activities, dates, communication strategy, and fundraising were developed by a subcommittee who communicated in person, by phone and via email over the course of a couple months. The subcommittee kept the Service Committee and membership informed on the progress of the project and the opportunities to participate in a variety of ways in the weeks leading up to Make a Difference Day, October 27, 2008 when the project was conducted in main. Specifically, the project status and participation opportunities were featured in the Club's weekly E-update, monthly newsletter, meetings, and printed meeting agendas and on the Club's website.

Club members donated new books, funds for more books and materials (DVDs and packing materials), supplies for notes and baked sweets. In addition, the subcommittee submitted a grant request for \$1000 to Altrusa International Foundation to provide additional funds to purchase books and materials for the Dallas USO's Program and a new Program beginning in Belad, Iraq. The grant was received in late fall 2008 and used in the project.

An estimated 85% of the Club, 47 members, participated in the project, providing an estimated total of 140 hours of service. Members with culinary skills made home baked treats to pass out to departing servicemembers while Club members informed soldiers of the Program and encouraged them to participate

while they waited several hours at the airport for their plane to depart for the Middle East. Other members solicited friends, children and their school friends, family and workmates to participate by making treats, writing notes or helping at the airport USO facility. And, of course, the project would not have been possible without the Dallas USO and United Through Reading Program.

Approximately 250 servicemembers from all over the country pass through the Dallas USO at the airport each day – as they did on the day of our project -- returning from R&R family visits and taking planes back to Iraq and Afghanistan. As the servicemembers arrived at the airport, and after they mustered in and waited several hours to depart, our Club members visited with them, offered them goodies, handed them notes of thanks, encouraged them to participate in the Program, learned about their families and lives, and helped them to select books for each special child in their lives and to make their DVD recordings.

Our Club members proudly advertised our Altrusa affiliation by wearing special shirts our Club has designed for Altrusa service projects bearing the Altrusa name and emblem. They were a conversation starter with other travelers, servicemembers and their families, and airport visitors who wanted to know about our Club and project. The USO coordinators assisting us told us that due to our activities, they had one of the highest ever participation rates in the Program. Our members and guests who participated in the project uniformly felt that our presence and efforts were appreciated by the servicemembers and -- very importantly to our members -- we had an opportunity and a tangible way to say thank you to our troops. Our Club has varying views about the appropriateness of

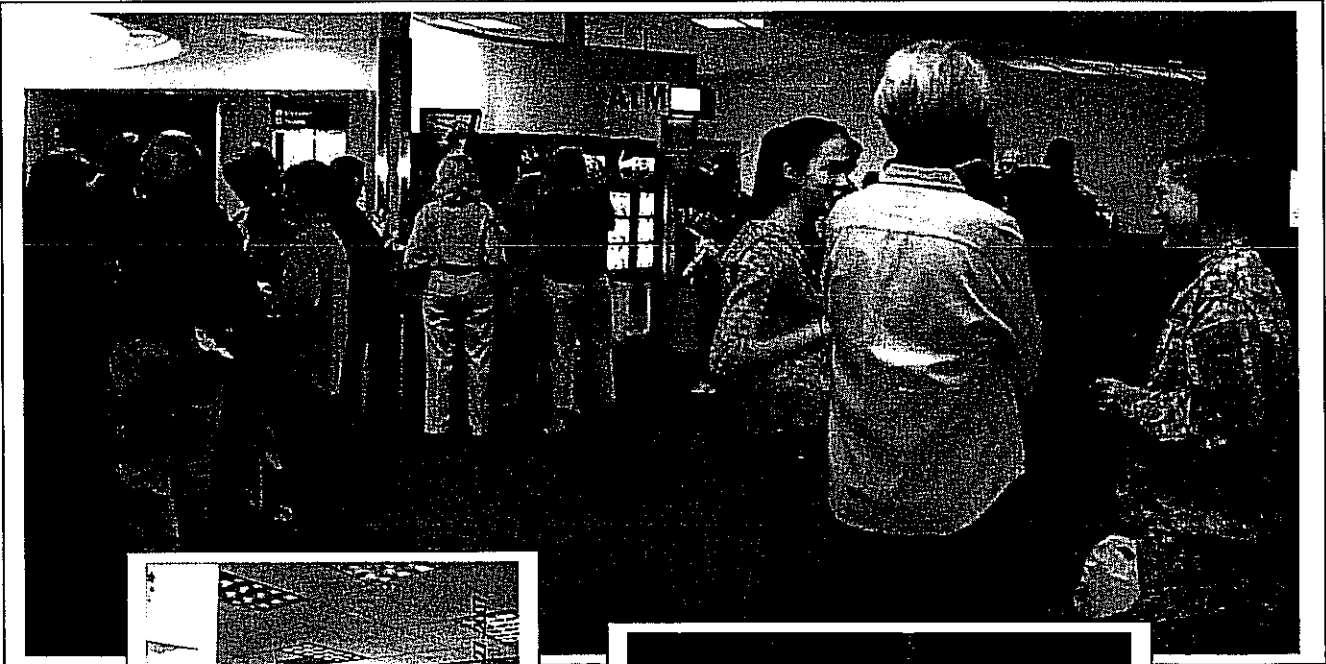
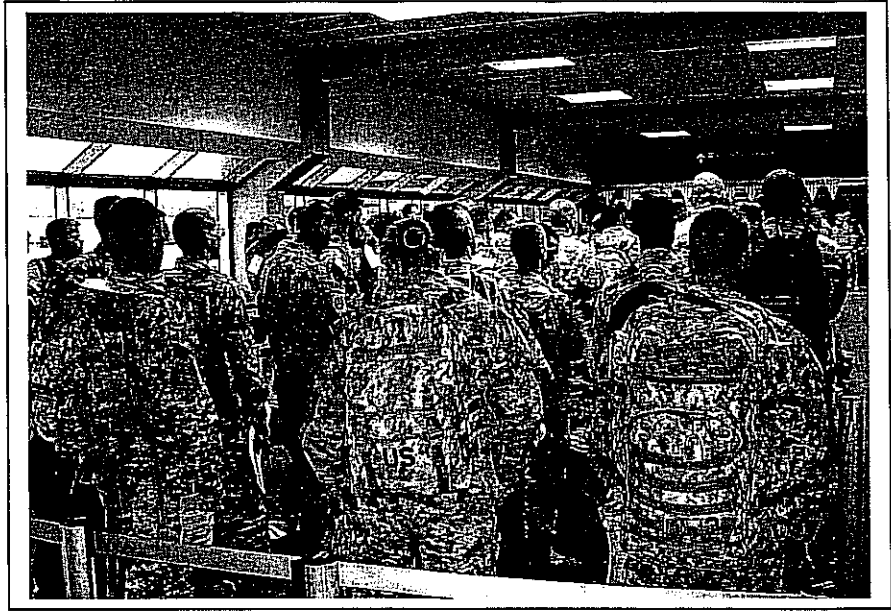
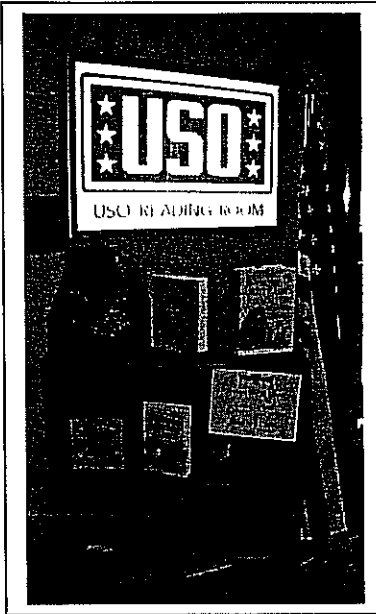
the Middle East wars, but there is broad support and gratitude for the sacrifices our troops and their families are making as well as a belief that the troops don't receive enough expressed support for what they do. This project let us reach not only the 250 or so servicemembers who were present at the airport on Make a Difference Day, but also the many soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who, in the future, will select the 100+ new books we donated and the other new books and materials purchased with our contributions, for their children, and their families back home.



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Marrie Smith, President

# Downtown Altrusans help the USO with United Through Reading



## Soldiers, kids share storytime 📖

11:58 AM CST on Sunday, February 4, 2007

By KATHY A. GOOLSBY / The Dallas Morning News  
[kgoolsby@dallasnews.com](mailto:kgoolsby@dallasnews.com)



RICK GERSHON/DMN

Staff Sgt. Timothy Atkins might not be there to tuck in his children at night, but the United Through Reading program enables him to read them a bedtime story.

In the final minutes before his deployment to Iraq last month, Army Pvt. Larry Levy sat down for some quality time with his 5-year-old son, Sterling. He first read his son a book, chuckling as he turned the pages and talked about the pictures.

But when he closed the book, Pvt. Levy's voice turned serious.

"You know where Daddy's going, Bubba," Pvt. Levy said. "You know Daddy's got to go to Baghdad to fight the bad guys."

The father paused and took a ragged breath. When he spoke again, his voice choked with emotion.

"I need you to do good in school," the Arlington native said. "Take care of your mom and sissy."

There was no response from Sterling. Pvt. Levy would be in Iraq before his son heard that heartfelt message, recorded as part of the United Service Organization's United Through Reading program at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

Since August, more than 400 troops passing through the airport on their way to war have paused to record books for their children. The recordings, punctuated with special messages and occasional tears, are shipped to each child along with the books that are read.

**Also Online**

## **VIDEO** Soldiers videotape story readings for their kids

The mini-DVDs allow sons and daughters to follow along with Mom or Dad. Seeing the parent on the screen helps connect families separated by time, distance and war.

"This is just a great program because it lets the soldier leave a lasting impression and lets their family know, 'I'm thinking of you,' " said Maj. Patrick McAfee, commander of the Dallas-Fort Worth personnel assistance point.

Maj. McAfee oversees the almost daily troop deployments at the airport. During his briefing, he encourages soldiers with children to stop by the USO United Through Reading room and record a book.

### Pitching in

Officials with the Grand Prairie Chamber of Commerce heard about the program while participating in the meet-and-greets for arriving soldiers and wanted to do something for the soldiers on their way back to war, said chamber president RaDonna Hessel.

The group put out a request to its members for donations and in November had collected 600 books and about \$600 for the program. Already, the group's working on a second donation, with many of its members hosting book drives through work.

"A lot of our members asked if we could continue collecting books, because it really touched a lot of them," Ms. Hessel said. "This is a way for us to do something not just for the soldiers who are leaving, but something for the families they leave behind."

Irving resident Sherri Allen, whose son Jared is a Marine reservist who recently returned from Iraq, coordinates the D/FW reading program.

"I believe strongly in supporting our troops and their families, and this is one of the best programs for doing that," Ms. Allen said.

The majority of participating troops have young children, so baby, toddler and read-to-me books are very popular. Those books are also quick reads, so even late-arriving soldiers have time to make a recording.

But the selection also includes young adult and chapter books geared toward older children. With those books, the soldier usually reads the first chapter, then encourages the child to finish the book on his or her own.

### Just like at home

Staff Sgt. Timothy Atkins, a Tennessee native based in Killeen, Texas, read three books during his session – one each for sons Mathew, 7, and Austin, 5, and his 2 ½-month-old daughter, Chyann. Between books, he talked to the kids just like he would at home.

"I read stories to them every night that I can, so this is one of the many things that will keep me closer to them," Sgt. Atkins said before sitting down in front of the camera. "My wife's going to be pretty shocked when she gets this, but any little thing to keep in touch with them."

United Through Reading is a partnership with the Family Literacy Foundation. The local program is one of four in Texas and 19 throughout the U.S. There are 15 reading rooms at USO facilities overseas, including Japan, Germany, Afghanistan and Kuwait.

The D/FW program is one of the largest, Ms. Allen said. The North Texas USO also has a strong volunteer base, she said, which is crucial to the program's success.

East Texas sixth-grader Katie Mann of Lindale asked guests to bring books instead of gifts to her 12th birthday party last month.

Katie's efforts netted more than two dozen books for the program that has mailed out about 800 books since August.

"I invited a lot of friends to my party, but I didn't need a lot of stuff," Katie said. "My mom always read to me when I was little, and I felt bad for the kids whose parents weren't there to read to them."

#### Grateful parents

Parents such as Johnnye Nicholas and Frank Andrade of Tyler are grateful. The Army specialists, who are deployed together, stopped by the reading room last week on their way home to see son Zachary, 14 months.

Each recorded a book for him, then Spc. Nicholas sat on her husband's lap while they took turns reading from a third book. The couple plans to leave the books and accompanying recordings with Zachary when they return to Iraq in two weeks.

On her way back to Iraq last week, a tearful Andrea Guara of Denton asked to read the children's book *My Mother is Mine* for her mom, Laura Fleming.

USO volunteers didn't bat an eye at the request of the 20-year-old. They understand that the need to stay connected knows no age limits.

"I'm the oldest, and it's really hard for me to be gone, and where I'm at, it's kind of dangerous so we can't contact each other very often," said Pfc. Guara. "But I know when she sees this, she's going to be very happy. It's going to uplift her."

#### HOW TO HELP

The USO welcomes monetary or book donations for its United Through Reading program. Only new books are accepted; books for infants through young adults are needed. To make a donation, contact Sherri Allen at 972-574-8182 or e-mail [sallen@uso.org](mailto:sallen@uso.org).