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Column: How Amazon gave Fallbrook's Empowering Latino Futures more literary leverage



Empowering Latino Futures president Kirk Whisler (right) and programs manager Ana Patiño are shown in the literary nonprofit's Fallbrook offices. Empowering Latino Futures is one of 74 organizations to to receive a 2022 grant from the Amazon Literary Partnership. (John Gastaldo/For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

An Amazon Literary Partnership grant helps support the Latino Book & Family Festival and Latino Publishing University

BY KARLA PETERSON | COLUMNIST JULY 30, 2022 6 AM PT



After several people were killed at a Latino-focused music event in Los Angeles 26 years ago, publisher Kirk Whisler and actor Edward James Olmos decided to fight back in the most positive way possible. What their community needed, Whisler and

Olmos thought, were safe gatherings that not only welcomed Latino families, but also uplifted them.

One year later, the first Latino Book & Family Festival proved them right.

That first event in Los Angeles drew thousands of people. Thanks to its early success, the <u>Latino Book & Family Festival</u> has been held in eight markets around the country. San Diego will be hosting its 12th festival on Oct. 15 at MiraCosta College in Oceanside. The free community event will feature more than 100 exhibitors and appearances by more than 30 authors, along with bilingual workshops.

As for Latino Literacy Now, the nonprofit organization that Whisler and Olmos cofounded in 1997, there has been plenty of validation there, too.

The Fallbrook-based group now known as Empowering Latino Futures has developed such high-profile programs as the <u>International Latino Book Awards</u> and the <u>International Society of Latino Writers</u>, where Latino authors, books and readers are nurtured and celebrated.

And now, this champion of Latino literacy has another good reason to celebrate itself.

Earlier this month, Empowering Latino Futures became one of 74 national groups to receive a grant from the <u>Amazon Literary Partnership</u>. The Amazon-backed program was launched in 2009 to support nonprofit organizations that empower diverse and marginalized literary voices. Amazon is not disclosing specific grant amounts, but the 2022 recipients received more than \$1 million in total grants.

This is the second time Empowering Latino Futures has received an Amazon Literary Partnership grant, and the recognition remains invaluable.



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"It really reinforces what we try to do with this program when an entity like Amazon uses its resources to support our projects," said co-founder Whisler, who is also the group's president. "My wife teaches first grade in Vista, and when kids read books that have kids that look like them, it really matters. You want that young child to not just see themselves in books, but to see everyone."

In addition to supporting the long-running Latino Book & Family Festival, the grant is also providing a boost to Empowering Latino Futures' newest program, the International Society of Latino Writers' <u>Latino Publishing University</u>.



Empowering Latino Futures Programs Manager Ana Patiño (left) and Kirk Whisler (second from left) with team members Melanie Slone, Daniel Perez, Edward Becerra and Yenni Patiño. (John Gastaldo/For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

True to its educational title, Latino Publishing University will offer authors the kinds of nut-and-bolts information that can help new writers get their careers off the ground while giving smaller publishers the support they need to get books into the hands of readers.

The first Latino Publishing University conference will be held on Aug. 19 and 20 at Los Angeles City College, in conjunction with the 24th International Latino Book Awards ceremony, which will honor 249 finalists in 108 categories. Recent ceremonies have recognized works from such San Diego County writers as Laura Taylor Namey ("A Cuban Girl's Guide to Tea and Tomorrow"), Esteban Castillo ("Chicano Eats: Recipes From My Mexican-American Kitchen"), and María E. García ("We Made San Diego").

Between the established Latino Book & Family Festival and the career-boosting possibilities of the new Latino Publishing University, the Amazon Literary Partnership grant will help Empowering Latino Futures continue to make good on that original promise to give the community programs that make the present more enriching and the future more enlightening.

"From my point of view, I think we believe in voices being shared and voices being championed, and understanding that representing all kinds of voices and all kinds of experiences is crucial to a healthy society," said Al Woodworth, manager of the Amazon Literary Partnership.

"I certainly believe that reading engenders empathy and understanding and furthers conversation. It's so important that writers have the opportunity to share their work, and Empowering Latino Futures is doing such great work for the Latino community they serve."

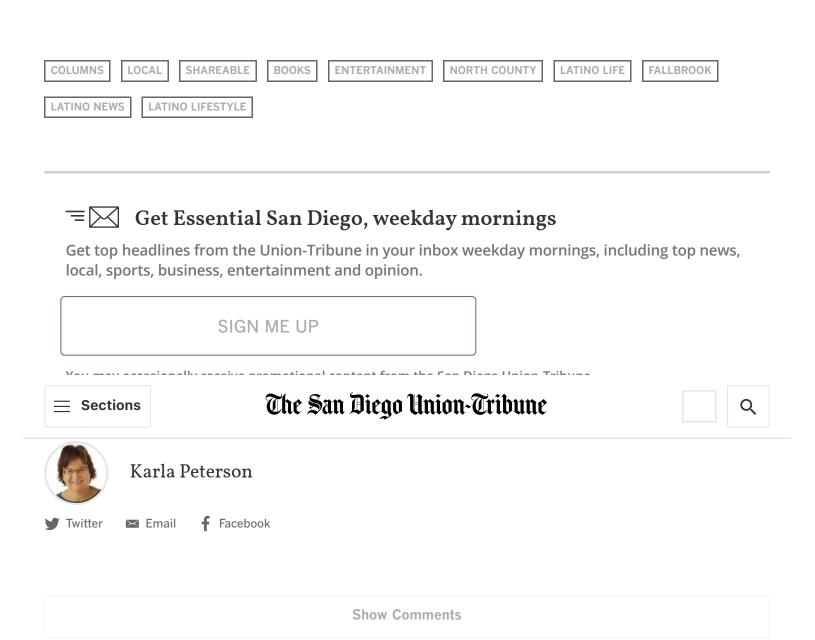
For Whisler, who grew up in San Bernardino, supporting Latino authors and enriching Latino readers honors a family legacy that has produced teachers, professors and principals. For Empowering Latino Futures Programs Directordirector Ana Patiño, who came to San Diego from Mexico 15 years ago, using her first-ever library card to check out books by and about Latinos was the key that helped unlock her future. And she is thrilled that there is so much literary empowerment to go around.

"It gave me this feeling of, 'I can do that. I can go to college. I can get a career.' That is a message you can get out of books," said Patiño, who graduated from Cal State San Marcos in 2017.

"A lot of stories being written are about the struggles of leaders out there who go

through difficult circumstances, but they achieve something bigger. We want readers to see that they can do it, just like the person in the story."

For information about Empowering Latino Futures and its programs, go to empoweringlatinofutures.org



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