

'Thanks and Have Fun Running the Country'

South Shore native compiles children's messages to Obama

BY JEFF MUNSON

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It began as a simple assignment a week after Election Day for the 65 children at 826 Valencia, a San Francisco after-school program.

The idea sounded easy enough, but required some critical thinking. The assignment was this: Write a letter to Barack Obama and either give him some advice, or, tell the president something about their own lives.

"I wanted to harness some of the kids' excitement about the president-elect, because most of these kids have only really known one president," said South Lake Tahoe native Jory John, program director of the nonprofit writing and tutoring center, one of seven 826 after-school literary programs in the U.S.

Like the ascendancy of President Barack Obama from state politician to leader of the free world, the result of the classroom project John conceived and then assigned to the students gained momentum to take on a life of its own.

After a first read of 10 letters to Obama, John, a 1995 South Tahoe High School graduate, a



Provided to the Tribune

Jory John works with children in an after-school program called 826 Valencia in San Francisco.

former Lake Tahoe Community College student and a University of Nevada, Reno, graduate knew he had something beyond a few cute notes and funky drawings of America's first black president. Instead he held a string of pearls. Some clever. Some thoughtful. Some heartbreaking. And some downright hilarious.

"I read them, and it hit me

right away: "This is a book," John said.

And that's exactly what it became. With John as editor, "Thanks and Have Fun Running the Country: A Collection of Kids' Letters to President Obama" has become a much-talked about project that, at its core, is really a child's perspective on the notions of hope, ideals and challenges fac-

ing the 44th president of the United States.

It includes 70 letters from children ages 6 to 13 along with dozens of illustrations. Each of the 826 programs contributed. The programs are in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Ann Arbor, Mich., Seattle, Chicago, New York and Boston.

With a first run of 15,000 copies by McSweeney's publishing house, a write-up in The New York Times, a feature on National Public Radio's "This American Life," as well as TV interviews with children involved in the project through 826 national programs in six other locations, the project has become an overnight sensation. Readings are planned across the country from the students who produced the work.

The title of the book is itself serendipitous, straight from the pen of a 13-year-old San Francisco girl, Yoselin Teresa Martinez Xonthe, who signed her letter to Obama: "Thanks and have fun running the country."

This book's title wrote itself from the signature, John said.

"You know how things happen as though they were meant to happen? Well, we saw this heartfelt letter from Yoselin, a totally organic conversation with the president saying how she was going to work hard and do right by her family and friends. And she signs the letter 'Thanks and have fun running the country.' I thought, 'That's it. That's the title

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Excerpts from book

Here are some of the letters in the book "Thanks and Have Fun Running the Country: Kids' Letters to President Obama" published by McSweeney's:

Dear President Obama,
You are just like a big me, because I am from Chicago, and I am biracial and have curly hair. I live in Seattle now, but I'm still from Chicago. I have an idea. Why don't you give everybody, even the homeless, 10 dollars every day? And don't forget to give the kids money, too.
Sincerely,
Avante Price, age 7, Seattle

Dear President Obama,
The first thing you need to do is put your stuff in the White House. Be careful, Abraham Lincoln haunts one of the bedrooms. Look around the White House. Meet with your helpers. Get a puppy. Talk to America. Make a speech. My name is Matthew Wong. I was watching TV when you were elected; my family was happy.
Sincerely,
Matthew Wong, age 8, Chicago

Dear Barack Obama,
Something happened to me: I went out to lunch at Starbucks and I wanted to buy a cup of whipped cream and normally it's 43 cents, but now it's 74 cents! The price raised 31 cents for no reason. So you should probably try to change things like that from happening. You should keep an eye out for things like that.
Love,
Alexis Feliciano, age 9, Brooklyn

Dear President Obama,
If I were president, I would tell people to not talk too much. It wastes time. If I were the president, you wouldn't have to pay rent. When you go to the store, you wouldn't have to pay for sure! I'd also say to war: no more, no more, no more!
Catherine Galvan, age 6, Chicago

Dear Obama,
When you became president I was so happy and I went to go tell my mom and dad and they were so happy that you won. Everyone in my class was so happy and we started to celebrate and we got pizza and it tasted so good and we got chocolate cake and pumpkin pie and it was so good. Are you nice? Are you smart? Do you have a wife?
Christine Pliego, age 9, Los Angeles

Dear President Obama,
I hope that you have some fun running the country. I'm still so happy that you won for president. I have a question. Do you like the White House? And does publicity get annoying? Well, for me, I think it would. I really think that with you as president the country will succeed.
As some people say ...
Obama = Hope.
Take care,
Dolores Cervantes, age 12, San Francisco

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