

# Bibliotequitas para Tualatin (Bibliotequitas for Tualatin)

by **Immer Honorato**  
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The City of Tualatin is home to around 5,000 individuals who identify as Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau, 2020). Uniquely, many of the Spanish speakers who immigrated to Tualatin are from Guerrero. Guerrero is located in the southwest region of the Mexican west coast, sandwiched between the Mexican states of Jalisco and Oaxaca. Although many Mexican immigrants in Tualatin are from this particular region, we have a growing community from all over Central America and South America. This shift in immigration shows us the increasing need to provide relevant Spanish-language programs and materials for our community.

Before my time at the Tualatin Public Library, staff discussed creating Little Free Libraries for underserved communities in Tualatin. Little Free Libraries are not common in these underserved communities, and could be a way to bridge the gap between those communities and the library. The State Library of Oregon helped bring this concept to fruition by awarding an American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant to the Tualatin Public Library. According to the State Library, these grants were intended to “help libraries, museums, tribes, and their partners respond directly and immediately to community needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic” (State Library of Oregon, 2021).

The Tualatin Public Library received the ARPA grant at a time when the library was emerging from the pandemic and eager to serve the community. Rebuilding trust with the community was one of our top priorities. Historically, the relationship between the library and the local Spanish-speaking community was somewhat neglected. We identified needs in the community in order to provide new programs with relevant information. Our hope was to make the library accessible for those communities.

After we received the grant, we were ready to use the Little Free Library format as the framework of our project. We renamed them “*Bibliotequitas*” or “little libraries” for our target audience. We connected with local businesses, apartment complexes, and family partner advocates in our school district; these partners helped us identify the best locations for the Bibliotequitas. Having this network of connections would also allow us to pivot if the model needed to be changed. During the planning stage, we also gained a lot of insight into what communities were experiencing during this time.

As funds rolled in, we purchased books for all ages. We decided early on to only purchase Spanish-language titles. We made this decision because we recognized that accessibility was important to our program. We knew we had to buy books that our Spanish-speaking community members could read. The reality is that many Spanish-speaking community members come from low-income and rural backgrounds; often this is why they decide to immigrate to the US. There is a comfort in seeing, receiving information, and communicating in your native language. With the books, we also included bookmarks promoting ebooks and other resources available with a library card.

We decided public schools in Tualatin would become the initial location for the Bibliotequitas. We chose two elementary schools, the middle school, and the high school. We rolled out the program mid-October of 2021 (see Figure 1). However, throughout the school year, we did not achieve what we projected. We were hoping to reach more people through public schools. In retrospect, we realized there may have been confusion about the free books amongst the student body. We were also unable to promote the program effectively. Traditional methods of promotion through library programs and newsletters were not yet reestablished, and physical access to the schools was limited. Our partners at the schools were working so incredibly hard to help students adjust post-pandemic, and could not devote time to promoting our program. As a result, we determined that our school model was not effective enough. The schools were adjusting to a regular school year. Students were also adjusting to school routines. It was clear that schools were struggling with student's needs and dynamics. The more we spoke with teachers and family partner advocates, the more apparent



Figure 1  
The Bibliotequita Poster for Schools

it became that they had their work cut out for them. These factors all had an effect on the interest and visibility of the Bibliotequita project in schools.

As the school year came to an end, summer of 2022 was on the horizon. The schools had to close their doors to us for the summer, but this gave us an opportunity to change course. I have to admit that at this point, I was not confident we would be able to get these books into people's hands, but we decided to try another type of location. We identified two local Mexican convenience stores that would serve as locations for two magazine racks full of books. We would check in every two weeks and restock books if needed. These two locations were a huge success! The foot traffic and the visibility piqued people's interest. We received positive feedback from the owners telling us that customers would ask when books would be restocked. These stores serve as a hub for everyday life for many immigrants in the community. The stores provide services such as cashing employment checks, sending money to Latin American countries, and, of course, offering products for sale. These businesses are pivotal components in the Spanish-speaking communities.

As the 2022 grant report deadline approached, the fall books from our Bibliotequita project made their way into outreach events. As a supplement to the magazine stands, we gave away several hundred books at *Viva Tualatin*, an annual cultural festival put on by the City of Tualatin. The Bibliotequita effort at the festival was a huge success and a complete 180-degree change compared with the previous year. Viva Tualatin is a celebration of arts and culture, and it is an event designed to highlight our diverse community. This event hosts a couple thousand people every year and takes place at Atfalati Park, which is located near a large concentration of Tualatin's Spanish-speaking community. Because the general population was now more confident and comfortable with fewer COVID restrictions, the city was able to put on a larger event than in previous years. It truly felt like a culmination of many projects and goals. The community as a whole was eager to connect and be a part of the celebration.

As difficult as it was in the beginning, we were able to accomplish the goals we established. While the Bibliotequitas did not directly lead to a significant increase in library visitation by our Spanish-speaking community members, we did see an increase in the use of our Spanish and bilingual children's books. Because ebooks are provided through the Washington County Cooperative Library Services, we were not able to measure whether local use of Spanish-language ebooks also increased. On the other hand, we established meaningful relationships with new members of our community. We were also able to rekindle relationships that we had prior to the pandemic and are continuing to develop new opportunities for partnerships.

## References

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