

**I**n 1998, former Redwood City Mayors Georgi LaBerge and Jack Greenalch, along with Sandra Cooperman, founded the nonprofit group the Redwood City Library Foundation to raise money to support library projects that contribute to the children and seniors of the community. The foundation's goal is to enhance access to information, knowledge and technology. It funds important enhancements to the library, such as added resources and programs for families, seniors and those with special needs. In the last 20 years, the foundation has supported many programs, including:

- Bridging the Digital Divide, a community Wi-Fi project that allows school-age children to check out and take home personal Wi-Fi devices (hot spots) and educational laptops.
- Early childhood learning centers in all Redwood City libraries.
- Funds raised to purchase entire collection for the Redwood Shores library.
- Updates and improvements for the Redwood Shores library's museum-quality interpretive educational center designed to help children discover the wonders of the bay and its wetlands.
- Writing Cats and Dogs, a six-week creative-writing program in partnership with Redwood City's Pets In Need for children 8 to 12 years old, where children write stories about shelter animals. The stories are published in a book at the end of each program.
- High School in the Library, an 18-month program developed in partnership with the California State Library and Project READ, that pairs each student with an online academic coach, resulting in a high school diploma for the student.
- Free books in Spanish and English for families with young children to encourage reading at home.
- La Cocina, a mobile kitchen promoting healthy cooking.
- Project READ Kids in Partnership (KIP) program where teen tutors provide one-on-one after-school tutoring.

Many students and adults in the community have benefited from these and other programs in the Redwood City library. One of these is DeBraun Thomas, now a successful musician, radio host and producer, and community organizer.

When Thomas was growing up in Menlo Park, he was having difficulty in school. When his fourth-grade teacher recognized that he had some cognitive math-based learning disabilities, his mother, Debbi Jones-Thomas, who worked as housing coordinator for the City of Redwood City, took him to Project READ at the library.

Project READ is a free, volunteer-based literacy program serving adults, children and families. Project READ connected Thomas with a tutor and mentor, who guided him through the elementary school years. When Thomas hit middle school, a new set of problems

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**Jan Pedden**  
Redwood City Public Library



arose. Project READ arranged for testing for Thomas to identify his specific needs and also taught his mother how to negotiate an IEP (individualized education plan), so she could navigate through the system and find the best alternatives for her son. Throughout his middle and high school years, including summer school sessions, Thomas spent time after school in the library when his mother had to work or attend evening meetings. Jones-Thomas credits the library and the policemen in the PAL (Police Activities League) programs with providing emotional support to Thomas during his teen years.

Project READ continued to support Thomas when he enrolled at the University of Kentucky by forwarding his records to the university so they were able to develop

a curriculum around his special needs, with emphasis on communication classes instead of math.

Thomas graduated from the University of Kentucky in 2012 and started working at radio station WUKY, the local NPR affiliate, where he now hosts and produces a weekly music segment and has produced several documentaries. His interest in music began when he was growing up, playing in music clubs in the San Francisco Bay Area, and he has been performing his original music with the DeBraun Thomas Trio since 2013. He released his first solo album, *All My Colors Are Blind*, in 2015. He is also a social organizer and in 2016 founded a movement with the goal of removing Confederate statues located at the site of a former slave market in Lexington.

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Thomas says that Project READ and the library provided a space where his voice as a child was heard. People, including tutors, were there to help him succeed and be himself by showing him how to cope with his particular learning issues. (And he has fond memories of getting Pop-Tarts from the upstairs vending machine when spending time in the library!) When he entered college, the Project READ evaluation proved that the cause for his poor math performance was cognitive, so the university allowed him to bypass standard math requirements and concentrate on his strengths.

Thomas now focuses on giving hope to other people. He likes to return to Redwood City to show others that it is possible to succeed when some people tell you otherwise. He said, "When someone is willing to believe in you, it makes it possible to carry on."

Jones-Thomas said, "Project READ was the amazing catalyst that provided the service that changed DeBraun's life. ... It was their evaluation that articulated the roadmap to structure the exact support that he needed to thrive, and they gave me the skills to advocate for the special

assistance he needed in middle school." When Jones-Thomas retired from her position in Redwood City, she considered becoming a tutor for Project READ but was convinced to join the Redwood City Library Foundation board instead. She said, "Library fundraising is what I refer to as a higher calling, where I can support the entire library system and help fund innovative programs that enhance literacy in today's world to help other kids to have the same opportunity to succeed."

Thomas will be back in the Bay Area in February for a special performance to help celebrate the Redwood City Library Foundation's 20th anniversary. On Feb. 3, the foundation is holding a sit-down dinner and auction fundraiser at Angelicas at 863 Main St. in Redwood City. Thomas' trio will perform and he will talk a little about the role the library has played in his life. Proceeds will support library programs for underprivileged children and the Bridging the Digital Divide initiative. Space is very limited.

You can purchase tickets now at [libraryfoundation20.eventbrite.com](http://libraryfoundation20.eventbrite.com) or call the foundation office at 650-780-7045.

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