

Students' lives in print

Project makes 6th-graders autobiographers

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The sixth-graders of Madison Park elementary school did not behold such a lofty goal as writing the great American novel.

They did not invoke the name Hemingway.

No, they were faced with a more daunting task: mining their 11- and 12-year-old lives to write an autobiography.

On Saturday, they became published authors.

Inspired by BookPALS, an all-volunteer children's literacy organization sponsored by the Screen Actors Guild, and funded by a grant by the Starbucks Foundation, dozens of the Phoenix school's sixth-graders received a hardbound version of the lives they illuminated, complete with text and photographs.

In this student autobiography project, a few of the authors stepped up to the microphone at the Starbucks at 24th Street and Camelback Road to read the books they had written and researched.

Others shared their books with parents who had not yet seen what had been written.

The grist from their true stories touched on everything from favorite colors, pets and music to divorce and even death.

Addison Gardner, 11, wrote about the time a swing cut her eyebrow.

The world now knows that 11-year-old Morgan Ritterbeck loves the color black and is obsessed with the music of Good Charlotte.

Someday, Diego Mendivil, also 11, hopes to return to Tepostlan, Mexico, to live with his grandparents.

And 12-year-old Dave Riley said he had always wanted to write a book, and with BookPALS and Starbucks, he was given the means to do so.

Dave was proud of what he had produced. So he stood in front of the crowd and read from his book.

He said that more important than the book was that he found out more about his family history and was able to express his feelings in published words like these:

"My mother's name is Jacqueline Marie Riley. My relationship with my mom is good because she's my best friend and I love her very much. My stepfather has been taking care of me ever since I was a few months old.

"No one could ever take his place.

"I love him with all my heart and I am proud to call him my Dad.

"A very significant event to me is when my aunt, Rosemary Harmon, and my great-grandmother, Melissa Parker, died.

"My life changed because now when I go home to Gary, Indiana, I won't see them anymore."