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Santa Fe summer reading camp brings books to life

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Faridah Ndiaye, top, helps Angelita Gallindo, left, and Yulissa Valenzuela work a little unicorn magic Thursday as dozens of elementary school kids sporting fantasy-themed costumes film *Tales from the Kingdom of the Magical Book of Hope*, a story penned during the Reading is Magic Summer Camp at the Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

There is trouble in the Kingdom of the Book of Hope, a place filled with forest-dwelling fairies and unicorns.

The scene is the setting for an elaborate story with an array of medieval characters, from fairies and dragons to court jesters and princesses, uniting under a similar struggle: environmental degradation. The young writers of the original movie script — mostly second and third graders enrolled in a summer reading camp — also star as the motley group, which solves their crisis through teamwork and a magical book.

Dozens of kids in the Reading is Magic Summer Camp donned Middle Ages-themed costumes Thursday as filming began for their project, *Tales from the Kingdom of the Magical Book of Hope*.

There were lights, cameras, special effects and even a clapboard.

Reading is Magic, a free summer program with several sessions for students of different ages, is organized by the nonprofit Reading Quest in collaboration with Santa Fe Public Schools and the Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences, where the camp is held each year. Participants — students who could use a boost in their reading skills — are selected through the school district and its Native American Student Services program.



Cameramen Orlando Skidmore, left, and Dwayne Joe with Fox Clan Productions film *Tales from the Kingdom of the Magical Book of Hope*, a story penned during the Reading is Magic Summer Camp at the Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences.

Tutors and reading specialists start each camp session with a goal of accelerating students through an entire grade level of reading standards in just two weeks.

Avery Armstrong, a reading specialist for Reading Quest, which offers tutoring services in reading and after-school programs for public school students, said some kids are further behind in English language skills than educators have seen previously, largely due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Each year, the camp is centered on the Middle Ages.

“Kids pick up vocabulary really well when it’s about one specific thing,” Armstrong said as campers, hungry after a morning of filming their scenes, went outside for a snack. “They don’t even realize they’re reading, but they’re reading over and over and over again,” Armstrong added.

She and other reading specialists, along with high school and college tutors, started the camp session last week by getting the kids acclimated to one another.

In the second week, the kids started to work on their film scripts and practice their lines.



Councilors Faridah Ndiaye, left, and Ella Rappaport, second from right, get their campers to loosen up before filming a scene for their film, *Tales from the Kingdom of the Magical Book of Hope*.

By the end of the second week, the students were ready to perform.

Ordinarily, they would put on a live play. But program Director Rayna Dineen said due to the pandemic, the organization chose to film a production at each camp sessions for families to watch from afar. The Native-owned Fox Clan Productions, a local company, is helping with the effort.

The film project, a big hit with the kids, could become an annual tradition.

Alyssa Enriquez, an 8-year-old heading into third grade at Nava Elementary School, plays the part of a hungry wolf aptly named “Wolfie” in this group’s film. She and her fellow wolves are heavily impacted by logging.

“We had to go and help make the forest all better,” she said, “so we could eat and live a normal life again.”



Brandon Carmona gets his cue for a short monologue in a film written by kids at Reading is Magic Summer Camp.

This is Alyssa's first time participating in Reading Quest's summer camp.

She used to love it when her mom read her bedtime stories, she said, but when that stopped, reading became a lot harder for her in school.

"My favorite part about camp is learning everything new and having all the challenges of reading," Alyssa said. She added with a laugh: "I wish we could stay here for like nine more months and skip school."

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