United Way of San Diego County's "Readers in the Heights" Literacy Summer Camp Preps 300 City Heights Children for Back to School
Students Maintain, Improve Reading Scores by 84 Percent

SAN DIEGO (Aug. 25, 2017) – "Happy. Excited. And confident!" are the words eight-year-old Zohal Najemeddine used to describe how she felt coming to **United Way of San Diego County**'s **"Readers in the Heights" Literacy Summer Camp** over the past month. Along with 276 other students, Najemeddine benefited from the camp that promoted active learning for kindergarten through fourth grade students to help prevent "summer slide" – when kids without access to books over the summer lose literacy gains made during the school year.

"If our kids go back to school happy, excited and confident about reading, then we're on exactly on the right track," said President and CEO Laurie Coskey, Ed.D. "We worked with the City Heights community to identify a gap in summer learning opportunities, and with the help of strong cross-sector relationships and volunteers, we were able to make a huge impact over the past four weeks."

Starting with 40 students at one site last year, the summer camp grew more than six times its original size this year to 277 students at four sites: Cherokee Point Elementary, City Heights Community Development Corporation, Copley-Price YMCA and Hamilton Elementary. All of the children live in City Heights, which has the highest concentration of youth in San Diego County – and, consequently, the highest number of vulnerable youth. City Heights is also one of the county's most multicultural communities.

Assessed in the first two days and in the last two days of the four-week camp, **84 percent of the students maintained or improved their reading scores**. Coskey added, "We used a proven assessment tool to measure our impact and it shows that what we're doing is working."

In total, the children experienced almost 10,000 hours of learning. The early elementary students read to more than 150 corporate and individual volunteers who donated over 600 hours. Volunteers read to the children, and the children read to them. They worked individually and in small groups, asking questions to engage critical thinking and reasoning, and playing word games to build vocabulary skills. The camp also included trips to the library, where many received their first library cards; a police day, where the children met police officers and climbed in and through their vehicles and tried on gear; interactive nutrition and STEM-related activities; and even ukulele lessons.

United Way's partnership with San Diego Theatre Connection yielded 250 book donations made from theatergoers during their July and August shows, and volunteers from United Way corporate partner Deloitte were so moved by their volunteer experience that they pooled their dollars and donated $1,000 to buy more books for the children.

"To see their faces light up with a book because they've been reading all summer long is exactly what we want," said San Diego Unified School District Superintendent Cindy Marten. "The kids from Readers in the Heights are going to come back to school talking about the books that they're in love with and the literacy experience they had all summer long."

About United Way of San Diego County
For 97 years, United Way of San Diego County have been disrupting cycles of poverty by tackling issues impacting children and families in San Diego. The nonprofit plays a unique role, working with hundreds of nonprofits, schools, businesses and community leaders to **CHANGE THE ODDS** for children by focusing on educational interventions and family stability to support children *outside* the classroom so they can be successful *inside* the classroom. LIVE UNITED is a call to action for everyone to get involved by donating and volunteering. Learn more at www.uwsd.org, Facebook and Twitter. Download the NEW United Way of San Diego County app on the Apple Store.

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