



# Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Children Through the Power of Reading

*Serving immigrant and refugee students and families is much more than teaching English as a second language. How can we use the power of literacy in schools to embrace the needs of all students, to instill the audacity of equality, and empower them to pursue their American Dream?*

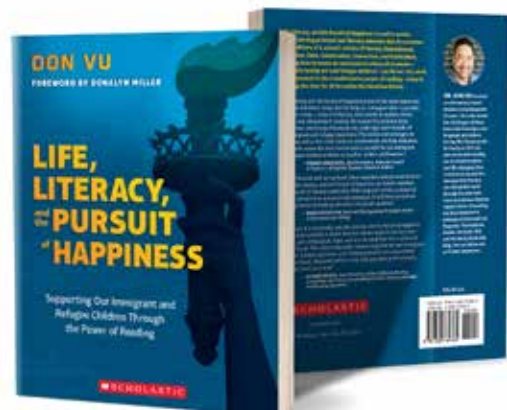


## LITERACY CHAMPION: DON VU

Dr. Don Vu has been an elementary school teacher and principal for 24 years. Don and his former school staff chartered a literacy campaign in 2013 to foster the love of reading in all students. In 2017, he received the Celebrate Literacy Award from the California Reading Association (CRA) for his outstanding leadership in literacy. In 2018, his school was one of five schools nationally to receive the Exemplary Reading Program Award from the International Literacy Association (ILA). In 2020, the school received the California Distinguished School Award for its work in closing the opportunity gap for all kids.

He understands the challenges children face when learning a new language and culture, having fled Vietnam with his family in 1975. He also knows that reading can be transformative and life-changing. Don continues to spread the message that literacy can change the world through his work with state and national literacy organizations as well as his writing in publications such as Edutopia and Scholastic. He currently serves on the national advisory boards of Scholastic Book Fairs and the Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program. His new book, *Life, Literacy, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, is a call to action for all educators who want to build a school culture of literacy to empower all students as they pursue their American Dream.

Follow him on Twitter at @drdonvu for updates or go to [www.drdonvu.com](http://www.drdonvu.com)



## One to Know: The Audacity of Equality

In the minds of so many immigrants and refugees, there is an “immigrant tax” to pay for living in America. If you weren’t born here but want to benefit from everything America has to offer, you’ll have to bow your head and accept certain things in American life, such as racism and inequality. However, some immigrants and refugees develop the “audacity of equality”—the idea that all Americans have equal rights and protections no matter where they come from. They don’t tolerate being mistreated and they don’t ignore injustice.

Not having the audacity of equality is the reason why, amidst the recent skyrocketing cases of crimes against Asian Americans, many of the silent victims are elderly or recent immigrants because they concede that this is the price you pay for living in America. And, possessing the audacity of equality is why you see the next generation of Asian Americans—from actors to activists—stand up and say, “This is our America and we will no longer accept inequality and injustice.”

So, how do we as educators instill the audacity of equality in our own students? How do we help them develop a sense of pride for who they are and help them understand their importance in America? As often is the case, the power of literacy can play a critical role.

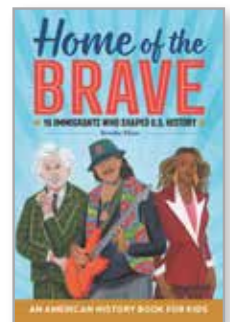
### Share the stories of immigrants and refugees

Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, who created the metaphorical understanding of children’s literature as “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors,” once said, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part”. If we are serious about empowering all of our students, we need to ensure that the stories they read in our schools reflect them and their importance in society. Imagine reading aloud *Dreamers*, by Yuyi Morales, to a student who is a new immigrant searching for belonging in this country. As you read and talk about this migrant story and the gifts the characters bring with them from their home countries, consider the impact on the child when they see themselves reflected in a book that celebrates the immigrant experience. When students see that their stories are important enough to be shared in school, they will begin to realize the audacity of equality, they will begin to realize the audacity of equality and begin to regard themselves as valued members of our society.



### Tell the story of America

We need stories that teach children, from an early age, where immigrants and refugees fit in the history and future of America. It is undeniable that immigrants and refugees have significantly contributed to the success of our country. Books that can be shared in classrooms include non-fiction titles that highlight the people who have made significant contributions to this country—those who make America beautiful. Students can explore the lives and contributions of 15 extraordinary immigrants who helped shape America in *Home of the Brave: An American History Book for Kids* by Brooke Khan.



From Albert Einstein to Carlos Santana, kids can learn about great Americans who were once new immigrants to this country themselves.

For far too long, our immigrants and refugees (as well as their stories) been relegated to the margins of society and our classrooms. When we make their stories visible and celebrate them, we can build a foundation of pride and citizenship that can make our schools and country better for all. With the audacity of equality, these students will leave our schools empowered to make a difference in their lives and in the world.

## What to Do

- Put on an American History Hall of Fame event in your school or classroom that is focused on the contributions of immigrants and refugees. Students can research and present on the person of their choice.
- Find a picture book about the immigration or refugee experience. Read aloud to students and discuss with them the issues and challenges immigrants face.
- Find a community member who is an immigrant or refugee and invite them to be a guest speaker in your classroom.
- Review your social studies curriculum and ensure that different perspectives—especially of those who have been traditionally left out of American history books—are included and taught.

## More to Know and Do

For a list of children's books that tell immigrant and refugee stories as well as additional resources for educators serving immigrant and refugee communities, visit [www.drdonvu.com](http://www.drdonvu.com).

Don Vu is available to work with educators, schools, and organizations looking to best serve immigrant and refugee students and families. In addition, his book, *Life, Literacy, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, is available at bookstores everywhere. For more information, go to [www.drdonvu.com](http://www.drdonvu.com).