



## Read to kids, just like Bill Walton

Bill Walton helps kick off recruitment drive

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NBA Hall of Famer Bill Walton reads to children at Monarch School as United Way of San Diego County seeks 10,000 volunteers to mentor, tutor or read to children in the region. — United Way of San Diego County

**DOWNTOWN SAN DIEGO** — With a handful of second- and third-graders seated on the floor at his feet, former NBA all-star Bill Walton kicked off a countywide volunteer recruitment drive Tuesday by reading aloud in the library at Monarch School.

Walton became the first volunteer in the United Way of San Diego County's campaign which seeks 10,000 people over the next three years to provide tutoring, mentoring and reading assistance to promote literacy among youth in the region. Nationally, the United Way hopes to recruit 1 million volunteers for the effort.

Walton, the father of four, grandfather of two and the son of a librarian, expertly held the book "Where The Wild Things Are" so his audience could see the pictures. In a quiet but strong voice, he took students at the school that serves homeless youth through the tale of Max and his imagined adventures.

"The great thing about books is that you can come into a room like this and pick any one of these books and these books will take you on a trip inside your brain, inside your spirit and inside your soul," Walton said. "But if you don't know how to read, if you don't spend the time learning how to read, you'll never be able to read to learn."

Education, income and health are the three main areas the United Way focuses on. Officials for the nonprofit say there is a need to help with education and literacy in the San Diego region, where one-third of fourth graders have difficulty reading at grade level and more than 8,800 high school students dropped out in 2009.

United Way plans to partner with several community groups that need volunteers, including Rolling Readers and Big Brothers Big Sisters of San Diego County. The University of California San Diego, which saw its students log more than 62,000 volunteer hours in the past year, also will participate in the effort by connecting university students with programs needing volunteers.

Rolling Readers Executive Director Susan Fiske-Koehler said she hopes as many as 500 volunteer readers come her way through the three-year campaign. “We have 100 classrooms who need volunteers right now,” she said. “I could place 10 in classrooms in year-round schools tomorrow.”

For his part, Walton said that volunteers could be “the spark that lights the candle that illuminates and shows the path to a better tomorrow.”

The small group of students listened quietly as Walton read the 1963 book by Maurice Sendak. But when he opened the floor to questions, the children didn’t ask about Max and his adventures, but about their storyteller: Why are you so big? How tall are you? Why do you have big feet? How old are you?

The Hall of Famer answered their questions — for the record, he’s 6 foot 11, wears size 17 shoes and is 58 — but also took the chance to plug healthy living tips: eat your vegetables, drink your milk, turn off the TV, go to bed early every night.

“It’s not how big you are, it’s how big you play,” Walton said.