

# Change the Children ...

# Change the World



Jackson School children listen intently to Just Be<sup>®</sup> creator Saúl Serna.

By Karla Nagy, associate editor

**C**onfidence. Gratitude. Respect. Responsibility. Generosity. We know our children will learn the basic math, science and language skills they need to get along in life. But what about the positive character traits they need to truly celebrate life, if they don't learn them at home?

Saúl Serna has come up with an answer.

Serna, a business and life coach who lives in Rockford, Ill., created Just Be<sup>®</sup>, a bilingual, four-year program for children in grades two through five that instills, or reinforces, these values. Through a series of 12 lessons, which are presented in the book *Just Be<sup>®</sup>*, facilitated by their teachers, reinforced through classroom activities and put into practice with their parents at home, children develop core principles designed to help them to become better people.

Serna wrote *Just Be<sup>®</sup>* over the course of about 20 hours, while stranded in a Dallas airport, after just having taught a corporate seminar. "I've written many books for training and employee motivation, and I knew I was making a difference in the lives of adults," he says, his accent revealing his South American roots. "But I thought, 'What about the children?' I started looking on the Web, and there were no coaching books for kids."

The writing of "Be<sup>®</sup>" is by design, with the second "e" in superscript, mirroring the math symbol, to remind students of the power they possess within themselves. Written in English on one side and in Spanish when flipped over, the book is introduced to second graders over 12 consecutive weeks. It first encourages children to "Just Be<sup>®</sup>" themselves, and then to be "the best me," by teaching them to Be<sup>®</sup> Grateful, Be<sup>®</sup> Healthy, Be<sup>®</sup> Creative, Be<sup>®</sup> Prepared and more.

Serna's goal: to have all children speak the universal language of mutual respect and appreciation. His plan is to bring the Just Be<sup>®</sup> program to 3 million children worldwide by 2012, and to 30 million by 2020. He has met with educators and city officials in San Antonio, where a plan is in the works to launch Just Be<sup>®</sup> in every school, in every district in the city. He's put Just Be<sup>®</sup> in schools in New York and Chicago; in Kenya, Africa; in Mexico; and in his native Colombia. In January, he presented the program to an international group in four different languages: Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and English.

Children in the program receive the 100-page hardcover *Just Be<sup>®</sup>* book, a journal, a parents' manual and a certificate of completion; teachers receive an instructor's guide, classroom posters and

online coaching support. Parents sign a contract that says they will help with the lessons outside of school. At school, the students practice what to say, like, “Mom and Dad, I appreciate everything you do, but I really need some help with this school assignment. It’s really important, and I can’t do it without you.”

They have a home connection chart, where parents write out the ways their child has demonstrated the quality being taught that week. If children have trouble enlisting their parents’ help, classmates offer suggestions, and Serna and teachers will even visit the home, to explain to Mom and Dad the importance of being involved in their child’s learning process. The parents receive a token of appreciation when their child successfully completes each lesson.

In the third and fourth grades, the lessons are reintroduced by their teachers, and in fifth grade, the students help to teach Just Be<sup>e</sup> by mentoring the new class of second graders.

Appropriately, the mascots of Just Be<sup>e</sup>, Spanish-speaking Papi and English-speaking Honey, are honey bees – again, by careful design. “Most people are afraid of bees,” explains Serna. “In their professional and personal lives, most people are driven by fear – fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of embarrassment. The bee analogy is key. I tell the children, ‘Fear not what’s ahead of you, but what’s inside of you.’ Fear, also, is the thing that divides us as humans. Once we understand the thing we fear, we aren’t afraid of it anymore. For example, without bees, most of our plants and flowers, the beauty and bounty of our planet, wouldn’t exist. So we should embrace the bee, not fear it. In the same way, we want children not only to accept themselves, but to accept each other, and to see that differences aren’t to be feared but embraced.”

Additionally, honey bees are highly social, and they communicate with one another, relaying distance and direction to nectar and pollen, even warning of danger. Every bee has a specific purpose, but all work together to sustain the colony. The hive is made up of self-constructed, individual wax hexagons, placed side-by-side for support, a program symbol that’s repeated on tee-shirts, caps, posters and stickers.

“The hexagon is one of the strongest shapes,” Serna continues. “It’s very good for building, because the sides are parallel and equal, so there are no gaps when they’re joined. They fit together seamlessly. It demonstrates the strength we have when we work together.”

It’s long been theorized that it should be impossible for a bee to fly, given its body size in relation to

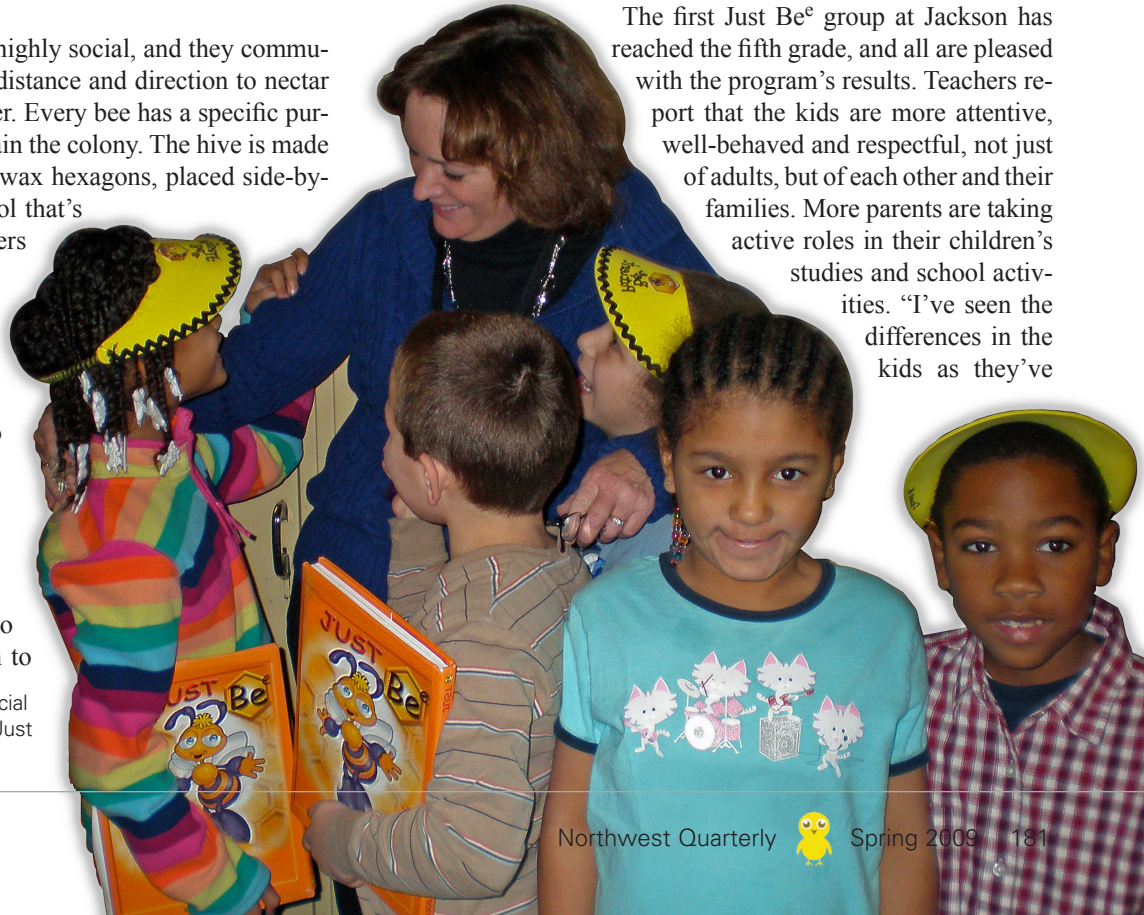
its wing size. But fly it does, at mind-boggling speeds, with precise navigation, even with huge loads of pollen, beating its wings at an amazing 11,000 strokes per minute, not just up and down, but in circles and at ridiculous angles, in ways that engineers still don’t understand. It even hovers. It’s the perfect example for believing in yourself.

“According to the laws of aerodynamics, bees aren’t supposed to fly, but nobody ever told them that, so they do,” says Serna with a grin. “Likewise, if we don’t discourage children, with comments like, ‘Oh, you can’t do that’ or ‘That’s too hard,’ but instead, tell them that they can be anything, achieve anything, if they’re willing to work hard, then nothing is out of their reach.”

Serna himself paid to have the book published, and in 2004, CENTURY 21 Country North in Rockford became the first corporate sponsor for the Just Be<sup>e</sup> program, bringing it to Rockford’s Jackson Elementary School. CENTURY 21’s owner, Jan Mansfield, who is married to Serna, chose Jackson because, at the time, it was on the federal watch list for low performance; nearly 85 percent of its students are from low-income families. Besides funding the purchase of the teaching materials, in March 2006, Serna, Mansfield and CENTURY 21 employees and their families refurbished the second-grade classrooms. They painted the walls, sanded and painted the desks, created special areas for each subject and provided new supplies, decorations, bookshelves, chairs and area rugs.

“The world needs help right now,” says Mansfield. “I believe the only way to make it better, over the long haul, is to change the kids, and that’s what this program does.”

The first Just Be<sup>e</sup> group at Jackson has reached the fifth grade, and all are pleased with the program’s results. Teachers report that the kids are more attentive, well-behaved and respectful, not just of adults, but of each other and their families. More parents are taking active roles in their children’s studies and school activities. “I’ve seen the differences in the kids as they’ve



A Jackson School teacher enjoys a special moment with students following their Just Be<sup>e</sup> lesson.

come up through the grades,” says Principal Dave Molck. “Parents, too, have told me that the program has changed their lives.”

Over the last four years, Sue Hollander, second-grade teacher, has gone step-for-step with Serna in implementing the Just Be<sup>e</sup> program at Jackson. “This year, I’m working with both fifth and second graders, and it’s really fun to see the fifth graders, because I had them when they were in second grade,” she says. “I know these kids very well, and I have seen the difference in their lives because of this program.”

The children themselves are its most ardent advocates. According to fifth grader Vanessa Collins, “The Just Be<sup>e</sup> program has helped me a lot, and my favorite topic is to show a good example. I love showing what a good example is to the youngest kids. I want them to be the best that they can be.”

But they aren’t all easy skills to master. “I’ve learned many lessons, but I think the hardest one is being consistent, because sometimes I would not wake up on time for school or appointments,” admits the aptly-named Honesty Woodford.

Charles McDaniel is most eloquent. “Mr. Serna, this program changed my life in a blink of an eye,” he says. “Now, I get to be a mentor to one of the second graders. The first day I got to teach my buddy was the best day of my life. Thank you, Mr. Serna, for being my first mentor. After you taught me to be a better me, I wanted to pass my potential on, and you gave me a chance to pass it on. I thank you for it.”

Parents, also, have expressed in handwritten letters the value their families have gained from the program. “The program has really changed Charles,” writes Sheila McDaniel. “He’s more grateful for the things that he has and the few things I can give him. He used to gripe and throw fits. That’s all changed. ... I want to thank you for introducing the program to my son, and I honestly believe that he will use these tools now and throughout his adult life.”

Just Be<sup>e</sup> includes follow-up for students through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. A Web site, [papiandhoney.com](http://papiandhoney.com), provides a touch point, where they can revisit the lessons and stay in contact with their friends, teachers and Serna. It is Serna’s hope that one day, through this site, students from all over the world can log on and see what classrooms and learning are like in other countries, and that it will serve as a bridge for appreciating diversity.

The book retails for \$25; the cost to sponsor a child in the program is \$200, which covers that student from second through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. A company can adopt a school of its choice, and Just Be<sup>e</sup> will calculate the cost, customize the program and oversee its successful implementation. Just Be<sup>e</sup>

is set up as a regular business, with revenues currently being used to cover the costs of developing the program.

Between Just Be<sup>e</sup> and other locally-sponsored mentoring programs, in 2007, Jackson School had moved up eight places in overall state rankings from its 2006 position, and the students’ state test scores in reading, math and science had risen by nearly 3.5 percent. The school has been recognized by the state for the past two years for its high academic improvement.

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*Saúl Serna*

Just Be<sup>e</sup> has the exact same lessons and goals Serna uses to coach adults, only written at a second-grade level. “I realized that the things that hold us back as adults are the perceptions we form when we’re young,” he explains. “Life isn’t easy, but it’s very simple. If you want something, work for it. If you want to change, do something different. But we complicate simplicity.”

For example, someone wants to feel healthier, but claims there’s no time to exercise or eat better. Serna doesn’t accept such reasoning; he says we’ve complicated something that should be simple, to justify the way we’re living.

“We think too much and set unrealistic goals, like big exercise routines and special diets,” he says. “I coach one degree of change. At 211°F, water is still water. At 212°F, it boils and turns to steam. Just one degree of change, and it’s completely transformed. We can change, too, one degree at a time. Do one different thing, each day, for 360 days, and by the end, you will have completely turned your life around, by 360 degrees.”

“Want to feel healthier? Drink one extra glass of water each day. That’s not hard, doesn’t cost anything, doesn’t take any extra time, and it’s very good for you. And you’ll feel fuller and you won’t eat as much. That’s one degree. The next day at work, park your car 20 steps farther

Children learn the lessons over 12 consecutive weeks. Here, a pair of study buddies work together on “Be<sup>e</sup> Patient.”



away from the door – another degree. After one week, you’ve walked more than 100 extra steps and hydrated your body. Keep doing these one-degree things, and you will feel healthier.

“I’ve taught this concept to adults all over the world, and it’s helped them. But then I thought, why wait until we’re grown up to learn these lessons, after we’ve complicated things, when we use excuses like our jobs, our families, our responsibilities, to keep us from being our best?”

Serna himself visits Jackson School regularly, to check in with teachers and students, and to help with the lessons. “I could go on any day, at any time, but I chose Monday morning, to set the tone for my week,” he says. “I’m so excited to get out of bed, because I think, ‘Today I get to go see the children.’”

Serna came to Rockford in 1981, as a high school exchange student from his native Bogota, Colombia, and went back to South America to attend college. He returned to the United States with \$100 and two MBAs, but the only job he could find was as a busboy, earning \$3.25 an hour; he eventually moved up to waiter. “It was hard, with my education,” he admits. “But I love America, and I decided that I would be the best busboy or dishwasher or waiter that I could be, because I was grateful to have a job and to be in America. Your job doesn’t change your worth as a person. You are your own best asset. You are your own economy.”

Serna former senior vice president of innovation and Hispanic initiatives for CENTURY 21 Real Estate LLC, headquartered in Parsippany, N.J., a member of its Masters Hall of Fame, and has received many other accolades as a Realtor. He also is founder and principle of Business For Life Inc., providing coaching and sales training to Fortune 500 companies. His professional and financial successes are wonderful, he admits, but they’re more of a means to an end for him.

“Nothing has changed from when I was a waiter, except now I wear suits,” he says. “I don’t have a job – I have a purpose, to passionately serve other people. I used to serve them food. Now I’m serving children, teachers and parents, making them excited about learning and about teaching.”



Jackson School fifth grader Airiss Ruiz poses with Serna and Just Be mascots, Papi and Honey, at a celebration dinner at Cliffbreakers.

Serna and Mansfield have paid for the entire project so far, including footing the bill for a banquet for students, teachers and parents to celebrate Jackson School’s successes. Some of the most improved fifth graders were asked to speak, and when Serna found out the boys didn’t have suits, he took them shopping and outfitted them for the occasion. The girls who were speaking also received makeovers for the event.

Now that the Just Be program has successfully completed a four-year cycle and has produced positive results, Serna is marketing to secure more corporate sponsorships. “I want businesses to see the value they can get from helping children,” says Serna. “It’s not just about revenue. At our office, morale is very high, because we’re not just working, we’re living. Helping at Jackson has brought everyone closer together, fostered loyalty and increased productivity.”

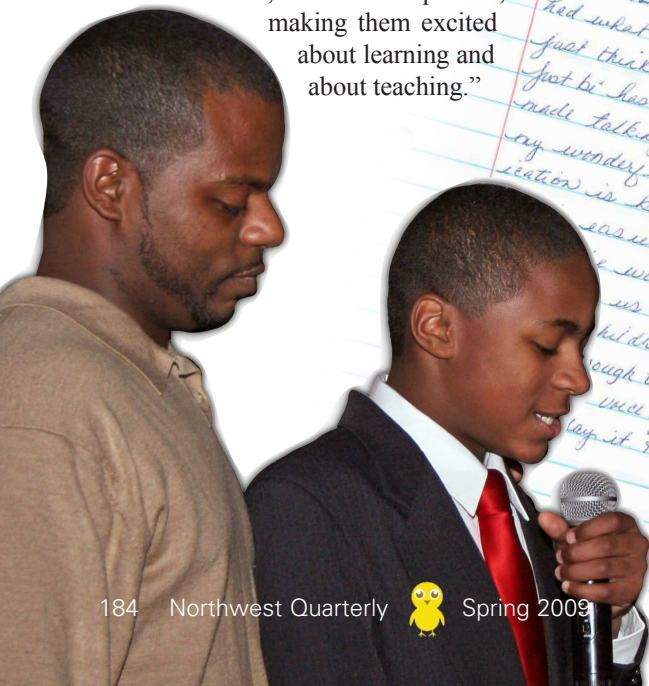
Another parallel to the bee analogy: Honey is one food that basically doesn’t spoil. If stored properly, it has an incredibly long shelf life. Similarly, Serna sees his work with the children as substantive and sustaining.

“Business accomplishments are temporary, but the difference we’re creating in these kids’ lives is permanent,” he says.

“In our culture, we talk about doing more, and having more, and then you become someone,” says Serna. “It’s just the opposite. Everyone is someone. Inside, we all have special strengths and talents. We’re teaching the children to look inside themselves, and to believe in themselves.

“We’re called human beings, not human doings. Our goal should be to live life with no regrets. We can’t take for granted how wonderful life is.” ■

With his father offering moral support, Airiss Ruiz speaks at the gala about Just Be. The letter, just one of many written by parents, is from his mother, explaining the value the entire family has gained from the program.



*I feel that the just be program has helped me, because it helped my son about the just be program and what it stands for. He has become a more confident, responsible and caring person. He's always just what it takes to be a good son. I just think he now knows that, so the way just be has changed my life is that it's made talking, listening, and understanding my wonderful son so much easier. Communication is key in our family's well being. I'm working towards just be was a season when we all understand us adults and our excellent "Lovers" children. Thank you to Mr. Serna enough to be the mister my child used to be. I'm proud of us parents who don't always say it. He did it just right!*

*Sincerely,  
The proudest mom in town -  
Tanesha Jones*

