

Lane Electric Ruralite

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Dolly Parton Imagination Library

Program gets kids off to a good start by delivering books to their homes.

Page 4

From left, Hudson Bruns, Kaleb Folck Jr. and Taylor Leach enjoy receiving free books by mail every month through Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which partners with the Lowell School District and the Fall Creek Education Foundation to support the program.

Photo courtesy of the Lowell School District



Books by Mail Boost Early Readers

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library supplies free books to preschool kids

By Craig Reed

When the mail arrives, there is excitement in Shelby's house and also over on the next block at Mason's house.

Packages for the pre-schoolers are addressed to the kids. When Shelby and Mason tear into the wrapping, they discover a new book, each with a new adventure, a new opportunity to look at words and another chance to learn to read.

The book might be "The Little Engine That Could," "Lookout Kindergarten, Here I Come," a Dr. Seuss book, a Winnie the Pooh book or a Good Dog Carl book.

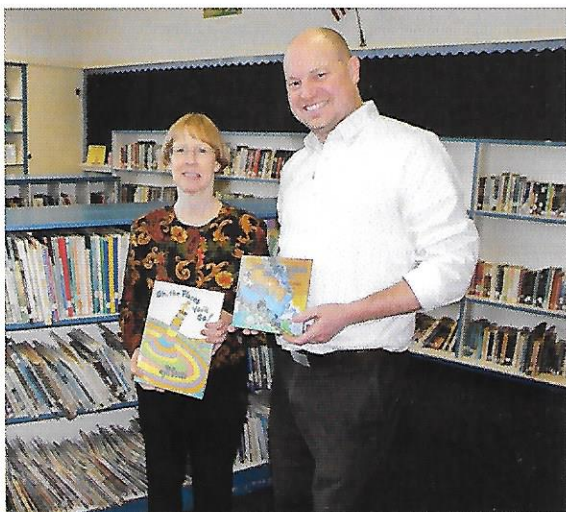
It's a process to encourage reading by preschoolers and it was instigated—and now promoted and sponsored—by Dolly Parton Imagination Library. Age-appropriate books are mailed every month to

children up to age 5.

The Lowell School District and the Lowell/Fall Creek Education Foundation partnered with the Imagination Library two years ago. Twenty-one Lowell area preschoolers have graduated from the program since then and 20 kids are now active. Since the program's inception, about 850 books have been shipped to Lowell kids.

It costs the Lowell/Fall Creek Education Foundation about \$2 a book. The rest of the cost is covered by Dolly Parton Imagination Library. There is no cost to the child's family. All children are eligible, regardless of the family income.

"Reading is the gateway subject to all subjects," says Johnie Matthews, second-year principal at Lundy Elementary School in Lowell. "Reading is a foundation for learning. It allows you to thrive in all subjects. This program seeks to build a love for



Maureen Weathers, a board member of the Lowell/Fall Creek Education Foundation, left, and Johnie Matthews, principal of Lundy Elementary School in Lowell are happy to welcome the Imagination Library to the area.

reading, for learning, in the kids.”

Maureen Weathers, a board member of the local foundation, says the Parton program is making a difference in the community. Of the 25 children who entered Lundy’s kindergarten last September, most had participated in the reading program.

“It’s good for the kids in our community to be better readers,” Maureen says. “The kindergarteners are coming into school more prepared than some have been in the past.”

In November, the book program in Lowell and also in the Crow, McKenzie and Oakridge school districts got a financial boost when Lane Electric Cooperative’s board of directors made a \$1,100 donation to each. The donation covers the local \$2 expense to get books to Lowell preschoolers this school year. The other three donations are seed money to get the program started in those areas. These four school districts are in Lane Electric’s service territory.

The seven members of the Lane Electric board heard about the Parton program at a presentation made by Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative representatives at the annual meeting of Oregon electric cooperatives last November. OTEC is involved in bringing the Imagination Library to children in Baker, Union, Harney and Grant counties.

“When our board members came out of that session, they were on fire about what a great way to support literacy,” says Lane Electric General Manager Matt Michel. “They came back and said if

we have some donation money, let’s get the conversation going with other school districts about the program. Let’s refill Lowell’s fund and get some seed money to the other districts.”

Matt explains that in making the four donations, Lane Electric is meeting three of the Seven Cooperative Principles: Education, Training and Information; Concern for Community; and Cooperation Among Cooperatives.

“We’re grateful for Lane Electric reaching out to us and providing support for this library program,” Maureen says. “We’re a small rural school and a little bit can go a long way for us.”

Maureen says the donation will help provide 500 to 600 books to the district’s preschoolers.

“It really will make a difference,” she says.

The book gifting began in 1995 when Dolly established the program in Sevier County, Tennessee, where she was born and raised. She was inspired by her father’s inability to read and write. She wanted to help children fall in love with books and reading.

The idea behind the Imagination Library was that even if young children could not initially read, they would look at the pictures, imagine their own story and eventually learn to read the accompanying words.

The program quickly spread from Dolly’s home county to all of Tennessee and beyond. There are now participants across the United States and in Canada, England and Australia. Almost 1.2 million children are registered in the program and more than 98 million books have been mailed during the past 22 years. To those participants, Dolly became affectionately known as “the book lady.”

The Dollywood Foundation now manages the program. It chooses the books and mails them. The local partner recruits and manages the list of young recipients.

Lowell got involved in 2015 when Abby Rius, a Lowell teacher, heard about the program through a Eugene connection and then pitched it to the school district. The Lowell/Fall Creek Education Foundation became the local nonprofit partner with each of its six members, donating \$100 to help get the program established.

“Abby saw a need in kids from our community,” Johnie says. “Some kids come into our school with some definite reading needs. Some of our pre-K kids don’t necessarily have access to books at home.” ■