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NEWS LOCAL

LOCAL NEWS

Eugene library foundation mails free books to preschoolers with help from Dollywood

Imagination Library aims to nurture love of books and reading



Jess Wood reads "The Little Engine that Could," to her daughter, Wynn Wood, at the Eugene Public Library in Eugene. The Woods are enrolled in Imagination Library, a program for Eugene children ages birth to four in which they receive a new book in the mail each month. (Andy Nelson/The Register-Guard)

BY **LILLIAN SCHROCK**

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Eugene 2-year-old Wynn Wood receives a book in the mail every month and immediately instructs her parents to open the shrink-wrapped package.

A local program that mails free books to Eugene children is helping the toddler become passionate about reading.



“When they get a book in the mail in an envelope with their name on it, it makes them excited about reading,” said Monica Wilton, executive director of the Eugene Public Library Foundation.

Wood is one of more than 3,700 Eugene children who receive free books in the mail through a local chapter of the Imagination Library program. About 45 percent of Eugene children under 5 years old participate in the program.

Started in 1995 by singer-songwriter Dolly Parton through her Dollywood Foundation, the international program fosters a love of reading for children ages birth to 4 by mailing age-appropriate books directly to their homes at no charge to the family.

“The American Academy of Pediatrics has said the No. 1 most important thing that parents can do with their children is read with them,” Wilton said.

“And the right time to start is the day they’re born,” added Alan Meyer, a retired University of Oregon professor who serves on the local Imagination Library advisory board.



According to the United Way of Lane County, 56 percent of children entering kindergarten in Lane County in 2010 did not meet early literacy benchmarks, and 30 percent are at risk of not being able to learn to read by third grade. Poor literacy of children entering kindergarten correlates to low high school graduation rates in Oregon, Wilton said.

Wynn’s mother, Jess Wood, registered her daughter for Imagination Library when she was an infant. She’s watched her daughter advance through different stages of reading as she’s grown older. Wood remembered the first time Wynn turned the page on her own. Now, Wynn pretends to read to her 4-month-old brother, Wally.

Wood said she gets just as excited as her daughter for the Imagination Library books to arrive in the mail, because she tires of reading the same books over and over.

The Dollywood Foundation partners with Penguin Group to publish a collection of staple children’s literature books, Wilton said. A panel of reading and childhood development experts at the Dollywood Foundation choose the books, she said. All children, regardless of age when they join the program, receive “The Little Engine That Could” by Watty Piper as their first book.

There are more than 1,600 communities worldwide with Imagination Library programs, Wilton said.

The Eugene Public Library Foundation started its own Imagination Library affiliate in 2014 with the help of a bequest from Eugene resident Richard Kay, who had died in 2013. Kay left more than \$1 million to be shared by the Eugene Public Library Foundation and the nonprofit organizations White Bird Clinic and McKenzie River Trust. The library foundation continues to fund the Imagination Library program through community donations.

For each child in the program, it costs about \$25 a year for 12 books to be published and shipped to their homes. All money donated to the foundation for its Imagination Library program is used to provide books to local children, Wilton said. The foundation gives the funds to the Dollywood Foundation to publish and mail books to Eugene children.

Eugene families can register their children for the free program online or at one of the public libraries. All children younger than 5 who live in Eugene city limits are eligible.

The library foundation spends about \$8,000 a month for Imagination Library, Wilton said.

“The program has been so successful,” she said. “We’re racing to keep up.”

Wilton said it’s important to provide books to families. Each Imagination Library book also includes reading tips for parents, such as using the pictures to teach children new words, she said.

The last book each child receives as part of the program is “Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come!” by Nancy Carlson.

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A FIRST FOR EVERY AGE GROUP

Infants: “Whose Baby Am I?” by John Butler

1-year-olds: “Night-Night Forest Friends” by Annie Bach

2-year-olds: “Little Owl’s Night” by Divya Srinivasan

3-year-olds: “Meet Me at the Moon” by Gianna Marino

4-year-olds: “Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon” by Patty Lovell

A CHANCE TO GET INVOLVED

What: Imagination Library luncheon

When: April 6, 11:45 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Where: Valley River Inn, 1000 Valley River Way

Contact: The Eugene Public Library Foundation, by visiting its website, epfoundation.org, or by calling 541-338-7018

“When they get a book in the mail ... it makes them excited about reading.”
— **Monica Wilton, Eugene Public Library Foundation**