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TOP STORY

A bonanza of free books for area kindergartners

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1 of 2



Stacks of books sit in reading specialist Marianne Baker's office at Agnor-Hurt Elementary. Books are being donated to kindergartners at the Albemarle County school, as well as other area elementaries, by The Soho Center, a Madison County nonprofit, to celebrate the start of the school year and to encourage students to read.

KATHERINE KNOTT/THE DAILY PROGRESS

Adrienne Largiader's favorite book is usually whatever she's holding, but "Snowy Bear" has become a must-read for the kindergartner in the evenings.

“Snowy Bear” is a tale of a bear searching for a home during a cold winter night. It’s one of the free books Adrienne, who attends Agnor-Hurt Elementary School in Albemarle County, has received since school started, thanks to a Madison County nonprofit.

The Soho Center is handing out one book a day for 10 days to kindergartners in schools in Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Louisa and Orange.

This is the first year the organization has done the 10-book giveaway, which kicked off on the first day of school and will wrap up Wednesday. The nonprofit, founded in New York City, focuses on children’s literacy.

“This is a chance to give many families quality books to start a home library or increase the number of books they have at home and encourage them to keep reading every day,” said Jeanna Beker, executive director of The Soho Center.

Adrienne will proudly tell you which books she can read by herself, from “Angelina Ballerina” to “Chicka Chicka Boom Boom.” Now, her home library includes books about giraffes, moose and school.

She’s excited to see what other books she’ll receive next week and whether she’ll like them.

“I also give my sister a chance to read them,” Adrienne said. Her sister, Viven, is a second-grader at Agnor-Hurt.

Her dad, Anton Largiader, said he wants his daughters to love to read and has been providing them books for years.

“What I like most about this program is it’s a really great selection,” he said. “We generally like the specific books that they are handing out, and the girls like them too.”

Marianne Baker, a reading specialist at Agnor-Hurt, said the donation will help the school because staff members will know students have at least 10 books at home.

“It’s everything for the kids,” she said. “...It gives everybody a chance to have a book at home, so they can do some family reading at night. But what we really want is for them to love reading, and having their own books facilitates that.”

Service-area elementary schools receiving Title I federal funding were selected to participate in the giveaway. The federal Title I program is designed to help students from low-income homes, and funding to schools is determined by the percentage of students who receive free- or reduced-priced lunch.

“We want to make sure that children who might not have books in their homes are given this opportunity,” Beker said.

Generally, kindergartners are just learning how to read. Lessons at the beginning of the year are focused on the alphabet and sounds of different letters. However, having books they can take home and read over and over again will help their reading skills, Baker said.

Baker said going through the books will help the young students to learn where the front and back is and how to turn the pages and decipher the messages that the words and pictures are conveying.

“Children who interact with these books develop cognitively because they maintain a sense of story,” she said. “They have to remember what happens in the beginning so that the twist is a surprise. It helps them so they can pretend read, and we know pretend reading gives way to memory reading, which gives way to real reading.”

The SoHo Center donates more than 300,000 books annually to Virginia hospitals, schools and other locations, Beker said.

She said that at the end of the 10 days, each child will have received \$150 worth of books, which are all hardcovers. The books were selected with the diversity of students in mind.

“We really select for a range of kids’ interests,” Beker said. “We want parents and the school systems to find these books educationally worthwhile and enjoyable.”

The Read Every Day program, or RED, as the book giveaway is known, stemmed from wanting to mark the beginning of a child’s school career, Beker said.

“How do we celebrate the special milestone of starting kindergarten at a time where you really need to make progress learning to read and learn to read well by third grade?” she said.

Beker also said she wanted to space out the giveaways to make it more than a one-time event and to lighten the load in their backpacks.

From kindergarten through third grade, the goal is to teach students to read fluently and to comprehend texts, according to the Virginia Department of Education. Kindergarten is a building block in a student’s literacy foundation and in ensuring they are reading on grade level by the end of third grade.

Reading proficiency in third grade is a key metric for a student’s future success. In the 2018-19 school year, about 70% of third graders in Albemarle County and Charlottesville passed the reading Standards of Learning exam. Statewide, 71% passed the test.

State education officials have said they will work with school divisions this year to improve reading skills.

Baker said she's hoping to make RED an annual event and to expand to more schools, which would require community support. For more information about the organization, visit child2000.org.

Baker said the Soho donation is an "enormous gift."

"It's their book," she said. "We tell them, you can keep it forever and ever."

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