



## Fueling Imagination

by Katherine Larson

Any child younger than five who lives in the 49855 zip code now has an opportunity thanks to the joint efforts of Dolly Parton's Dollywood Foundation and the Literacy Legacy Fund of Michigan.

Through the program, the child (or someone who loves that child) can sign up for the child to receive a free, age-appropriate book once a month, 12 months a year, until the child turns five. No strings attached.

The books are mailed directly to each child, with the child's name on the book itself, so the child has the additional thrill of receiving personal mail aimed directly at him or her.

Singer/songwriter Dolly Parton started this program because her father could not read or write, and she knew that this kind of project could have made a big difference to him. All children have dreams, she believes, and "the seeds of the dreams are often found in books."

So she called her program "Dolly Parton's Imagination Library," intending it to provide both imagination and inspiration. It is not a charity or social service; rather, it is a gift program, mailing out nearly two million books annually.

Literacy Legacy Fund president

Nancy Wiseman Seminoff explained why the program starts with such young children.

"You can never start too young to read to a child," Seminoff said. "They see the pictures, hear the words, learn about turning pages, learn that in English words go from left to right and top to bottom—all these things are critical to literacy."

Besides that, Seminoff added, not only do young children learn the mechanics of reading, they learn to love reading when a parent or other loved one reads to them.

"And they build their own home libraries so these books can be read or read to them over and over again," Seminoff said.

Babies who are signed up when they are just newborns get the maximum benefit of the program: up to 60 books, many hardcover, over the years until they turn five.

In addition to amassing their own personal library, children receive other benefits. Seminoff—who has been involved in literacy education throughout her career, and is a past president of the Michigan Reading Association—explained.

"Just as in any sport, we need the necessary equipment, the opportunity to participate and some skill to do so, and the desire to be involved," she

said. "It is also important to want to read and to actually read for information and enjoyment."

That's where the child's loved ones come in. If someone whom the child loves and trusts sits cozily with the child and reads aloud, the child comes to associate reading with the warmth and pleasure of that experience. That, in turn, sets the child on a path toward success, Seminoff believes.

And, Parton emphasizes, toward imagination and inspiration. From books, children learn about other people, other places, other dreams and possibilities. They can imagine being an inventor or a doctor, a minister or an astronaut or a cowboy.

Favorites like Don Freeman's *Corduroy* show empathy and love. Patricia Wells' *Max's First Word*, *Max's Bath* and *Max's Bedtime* focus on events that every toddler can relate to with giggles. Other books give children words for anger or frustration, or plant seeds of hope.

The Literacy Legacy Fund of Michigan began its involvement through a pilot project in the AuTrain-Onota School District.

Now, with the help of donors like Mark Aho Financial Group and Range Bank, it is able to expand to the whole 49855 zip code.

In doing so, the fund is joining the

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United Way of Delta County, which is affiliated with the Dollywood program in Delta County.

Delta residents can contact Julie Mallard by emailing [julie@uwdelta.org](mailto:julie@uwdelta.org) or mailing to the United Way, 1100 Ludington Street, Escanaba, MI 49829.

The Negaunee Elks Club also provides a way for Negaunee children to enroll, with the contact person being Kristin Knapp of Negaunee Elks Lodge #1116, who can be reached at (906)361-4809

In addition, the Dolly Parton Imagination Library's website, [www.imaginationlibrary.com](http://www.imaginationlibrary.com), has an "affiliate locator" feature that connects would-be readers to their local program.

For the 49855 expansion to succeed, however, the Literacy Legacy Fund must raise \$25 per enrolled child per year as its share of their commitment to this program. Seminoff said those who enroll children are welcome (but not required) to donate that amount if they are able; she invites all others to make tax-deductible donations on behalf of other children or to the program generally.

Checks can be made payable to the Literacy Legacy Fund of Michigan and mailed to the fund at 1314 Picnic Rocks Drive, Marquette, MI 49855.

This is not the only program the Literacy Legacy Fund supports. Since its founding in 2006, it has been able to supply over \$53,000 in aid to institutions, agencies and organizations locally and in Michigan through evidence-based grants, legacy grants, special projects and scholarships.

Local projects have included:

- A Linguistic Summer Lecture Series across the U.P. focusing on Yooper English

- A workshop providing training and curriculum guides to enhance outdoor education in partnership with Hiawatha National Forest, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and MSU Extension

- A high school journaling project; a writing workshop for NMU English majors and local English teachers

- A legacy grant for the Third Thursday Literacy Nights at the U.P. Children's Museum, including free admission and a new hardcover book for each child participating

- Books for newborns

- Assistance with a digitizing project at the Marquette Regional History Center

- A legacy grant to waive the fee for NMU students to use the Long-year Research Library

- Funding the reprinting of a book on local shipwrecks accompanied by resource materials for school group visits to the Marquette Maritime Museum.

State-wide grants have included support for summer and after-school reading programs for elementary students and a book project to connect incarcerated parents and grandparents with their families. Much more can be found on the Literacy Legacy Fund website.

To sign up a child younger than five who lives in the 49855 zip code for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, go to the "Special Projects" page of the Literacy Legacy Fund's site, [www.literacylegacyfund.org](http://www.literacylegacyfund.org), and download an application.

**MM**

*About the Author: Katherine Larson is a writer, teacher and former lawyer who loves to read.*

