

OPENING BOOKS, MINDS

Couple tries to spark love of reading through program that provides free books to young children

By Cassandra A. Fortin | Special to The Baltimore Sun



Donika Neiger, 4, carries a pumpkin during the Sweet Pea Foundation's fall fundraiser at Milburn Orchards. (Baltimore Sun photo by Kim Hairston / September 19, 2008)

Carolanne Kappus treasures the time she spends reading to her 2-year-old son, Jack.

Every night since he was born, she or her husband, Mark Kappus, have read to the youngster.

So when her sister in Tennessee called to tell her about a book program for preschoolers, Kappus wanted to start it in her community.

"I wanted to start the program because reading is the foundation of a child's education," said Carolanne Kappus, who worked for 10 years as a paralegal. "It is crucial that a child be exposed to books."

After her attempts to get a nonprofit sponsor failed, Kappus started her own foundation. The Imagination Library program, which is offered in 43 states, will kick off at the Goddard School in Forest Hill on Saturday, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

At the event, interested parents can sign up their children and listen to books being read by county officials, including Jacqueline C. Haas, the county schools superintendent, and Nancy Giorno, the deputy county attorney.

Called Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, the initiative was started in 1996 by the country music singer to foster a love of reading in young children and ensure that all kids have books.

"Dolly has always felt that education is the greatest gift that you can give a child," said David Dotson, president of the Dollywood Foundation. "You have to think in terms of need. So much of what a child needs is impacted between the ages of 0 and 5."

Because of the importance of reading to children, the program evolved, he said.

"We wanted to do something to help prepare children to learn, and the logical answer was help them learn to love reading," he said. "We asked ourselves how we could teach them to love reading, and the logical answer was to inspire them with books."

As academic expectations for children entering kindergarten have increased, the program has grown tremendously. In 2007, about 4.5 million books were mailed to about 420,000 children in three countries and 43 states, Dotson said.

Dotson attributed the program's success to its simplicity and affordability.

"Our program resonates with people because it's simple," he said. "We send the books right to the child's home. And how many things can you do for a child for \$24? That's what the community pays per child."

A nonprofit sponsor is required to start the program in a new community, because the postage rate for mailing the books is lower, Kappus said.

For their program in the Forest Hill community, Mark and Carolanne Kappus started their own foundation and used their son's nickname: It is called the Sweet Pea Foundation.

"We would never have gotten involved with the program if we didn't have Jack," she said. "So we thought it was appropriate to name the foundation after him."

To participate, children up to 5 years old must be registered with the Sweet Pea Foundation by a parent who resides in Forest Hill. Then each month, the children will receive a book in the mail.

The first book every child receives is *The Little Engine That Could*, along with a letter from Dolly Parton.

Other book titles include *A Mud Pie For Mother*, *A Place Called Kindergarten*, and *Take Care Good Knight*. The books are purchased from the Penguin Group and are selected by a panel that includes a librarian, kindergarten teacher and a parents' group member. The children receive books based on their age.

The program is free to the parents. The Kappuses, through the foundation, will pay the \$2.33 per month, which covers the cost of the book and postage. Currently there are 1,054 preschoolers in Forest Hill who are eligible for the program, and of those, about 738 are expected to participate.

"Participation in most communities flattens out at about 70 to 80 percent," Dotson said. "The 20 percent of the population, who does not participate, is usually the wealthy people who have plenty of books for their children. The program is typically started in areas where there are at-risk, lower income families."

Kappus planned several activities to raise money for the program. Events were held at Milburn Orchards Sept. 20-21 and Sept. 27-28; quarter auctions and gift-wrapping at Christmas are in the works, she said.

Word about the program is spreading, she said. She has been contacted by people in Aberdeen and Churchville, who want the program in their communities, she said.

"I would like to see the program offered all over the county," she said. "Reading is crucial to young children. It's an investment in your child."

Amber O'Brien, the owner of the Goddard School, which is holding the kickoff event, got involved in the program because reading is her passion, she said. Every Goddard School has a different theme, and O'Brien's is Joy in Reading, she said.

"I know from my years of being a reading specialist, and home school mom, that a child's vocabulary is the biggest indicator of a child's success in learning," said O'Brien, who has a master's degree in reading from Towson University.

The program also promotes lap time and helps to develop early reading skills, she said.

"Parents today are so busy," she said. "But when they receive the book in the mail, and their child asks them to read, most parents will be encouraged to do that."

And reading at an early age is vital to children learning skills that will help them read, she said.

"We read to the babies who come to us at 6 weeks old," she said. "Through this process, the child learns sounds, then words, and our goal is that by the time they are in preschool, they are reading to the teacher. Most children will learn to read, but once they learn, they never read. The whole goal is that they learn to love to read."