

SmartWorks

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 Carroll Tomorrow
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Read to Me

The Ferst Foundation mission is providing books to children

For 10 years, the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy of Carroll County has been on a mission: to encourage children to read by providing books. And provide books they have! More than 400,000 books have been mailed in Carroll County, serving 2,350 “graduated” children and 3,300 currently enrolled as of October, 2015.

“While we cannot do everything, we can eliminate one of the reasons why parents do not read to their child — the lack of multiple, age-appropriate books in the home,” noted Karen Hartley, chair of the Ferst Community Action Team. Thanks to the tireless efforts of volunteers, 37 percent of Carroll County’s eligible children now receive books.

Children can be registered through a variety of avenues — at birth in partnership with Tanner Health System, at multiple community events such as MayFest and Southwire’s Back to School day, and multiple locations provide registration cards such as the library and the Carroll County Chamber’s office.

Two local families attest to the value of multiple sign-up opportunities. The Swint family became aware of the program during a visit to the library while the Huckeba family was told about it at Tanner Medical Center following the birth of their first daughter.

“As a teacher, I jumped at the chance to participate,” Kristen Huckeba said. “I read to my babies while they were still in the womb. I know that our early reading helped our four-year old Emery with her vocabulary and learning process.”

A “Cute Cub” in Central Elementary’s Pre-K, Emery’s teacher began a reading group because she and another child were so advanced in their interest in books.

Dankie and Chantrice Swint are so glad 10-year old Maya started receiving the books when she was “tinny, tiny so that she has always loved to read,” dad Dankie said.

Maya is now a fourth grader and extremely smart — all 100’s and A’s on her report card. During early visits to the public library, Maya would bring as many as 20 books to the desk to check out. She loves books about magical characters.

“Sometimes I imagine I am in the book,” Maya said. “Even if the books don’t have pictures, I use my imagi-



Dankie and Chantrice Swint listen as fourth grader Maya reads to them from one of her favorite magical books.

nation to create what I think something looks like.”

This reading program is a living, breathing example of the commitment of the citizens of Carroll County to improve the lives of its children. The Carroll County Ferst mission mirrors the mission of the Carroll Tomorrow/Chamber of Commerce’s Workforce Education Task Force: to develop literacy among young children in Carroll County in order to enhance their chances of becoming successful students, and ultimately, educable members of the area work force.

Even at the age of 10, Maya is thinking about her career. She is interested in art and fashion.

“When I asked her if she’d like to be a model, she answered ‘No, I want to design the clothes!’” Dankie Swint said.

Today Carroll County has more than 8,700 children under five years of age. But getting the books into their homes is just part of the goal, according to Hartley.

“We are committed to working with parents by expanding the hands-on activities that accompany each book, and developing family education programs so parents can function as their children’s first teachers,” Hartley explained.

Kristen Huckeba gives a perfect example of using books to teach her children, Emery and two-year old Blair. “We read at bedtime, naptime, even at potty time. Whatever developmental skill we are working on, I find a book that relates.”

When Emery got glasses at a very early age, she was struggling to adjust, Kristen said. "So I found a book about a little girl with glasses and I read it to her class and gave everyone a pair of toy glasses. Not a problem after that!"

As their children's first teachers, setting the example as readers is important. Both the Swints like to read for enjoyment and recognize the tie between reading and learning.

"When Maya was transitioning from kindergarten to first grade, I was so nervous because the books were harder with longer words," Dankie said. "I was feeling sorry for her, but when she read aloud her first grade book, she said 'I can do better than that' and started all over and read it again. She gave me such inspiration."

Maya was paying close attention to books even at an early age. When Chantrice read nursery rhymes to her, she would often change the words or names. "But she would catch me every time," she said.

Ferst books are not only age-appropriate in content, they are also age-appropriate in materials which impressed Kristen. "We receive heavy board books while Blair is a toddler so she doesn't tear the paper pages. Now that Blair is getting her own books,



Blair, 2, wants a closer look at the pictures while Kristen Huckeba reads to her and big sister Emery.

we occasionally receive a duplicate. But I just pass them on to the local Boys and Girls Club."

While there is no cost to the family to

participate, the expense to the Ferst Foundation is \$36 per child/per year for five years. With a goal of serving 65 percent of pre-school children in Carroll County by 2020, the annual cost of serving 5,680 children will be \$204,000.

That's where volunteers play a huge part. Dr. Melanie McClellan, immediate past chair of the Carroll County Ferst Advisory Council, pointed out that the core group of current volunteers is comprised of individuals with similar backgrounds — retired educators.

"We are recruiting volunteers with a variety of skills — business, media, communications," she said. Volunteers are needed for six teams, each with a specific focus: fundraising, assessment, communications, family education, children's registration, and volunteer recruitment/training.

Is it worthwhile to volunteer with the Ferst Foundation? Maybe our future depends on it. When asked what is important about reading, Maya replied "You have to let your mind be open, always in motion, so you can ask 'What if?'"

For more information on how you can support the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy of Carroll County, visit their website at carrollferst.org.

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