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DOING WELL ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURE BOOKS

Open Books program gifts children with free books, starting at birth

A child can receive up to 60 books, chosen by a group of early education experts, before he or she enters kindergarten.

By Sandra Guy | May 21, 2019, 4:00pm CDT



Eric B. Johnson is the executive director of OpenBooks/Imagination Library, which provides free books and literacy programs to underserved children in Chicago. | Rich Hein/Sun-Times

Chicago's Open Books — a 13-year-old non-profit dedicated to children's literacy — aims to put books into every child's hands citywide, starting at birth.

The group, which sells donated books online and from two bookstores to raise money for its literacy programs, has partnered with **Dolly Parton's Imagination Library** to expand its reach to children who most need libraries of their own.

In just a few months, Open Books has enrolled nearly 1,000 children into the program.

The process behind the Imagination Library is simple. Parents or guardians fill out a form to sign up their children — even as early as a child’s due date — to have a free book mailed to each child every month, from birth to age 5.

This means a child can receive up to 60 books, chosen by a group of early education experts, before he or she enters kindergarten.

“Our job is to get children enrolled, and to raise money so that we’re paying the cost of the books and they remain free to parents,” said Eric Johnson, Open Books’ executive director.

Studies show that a home-based library can boost a child’s academic success — and the average middle-class family has about 13 books for each child. Yet, in Chicago and nationwide, more than 60 percent of low-income households have no children’s books.

That’s one reason Open Books chose to partner with the Imagination Library — because Parton’s initiative has the scale and efficiency to obtain high-quality books at the lowest cost possible, Johnson said.

The Library initiative has started in the underserved and low-income neighborhoods of Austin, Garfield Park, Little Village and North Lawndale. Parents in those neighborhoods can enroll their children now. Open Books will continue to expand the Imagination Library to other neighborhoods soon, so other Chicagoans should stay tuned.

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“That’s a critical difference, since a child’s greatest brain growth takes place from birth to age 5, and by age 3, roughly 85 percent of a child’s brain is already formed,” Johnson said. “The potential to get kids ‘kindergarten ready’ is endless.”

Since entrepreneur Stacy Ratner started Open Books, it’s grown to operate two bookstores — one in the Fulton Market district and the other in Pilsen, and runs six literacy programs that help children from birth throughout school.

The programs range from Storytime, in which children sing and participate in read-aloud stories, to volunteer Reading Buddies who help second- and third-graders strengthen their reading skills, to creative writing clubs and teen-centered writing groups that publish their own works.



On May 11, 2019, Open Books collaborated with the teams at New Moms, VOCEL, Working Bikes, Turning the Page, Family Focus, and A House in Austin, in addition to children’s book authors Veronica Appleton and Corey D. Williams, to kick off the Imagination Library in the Austin Community. | George Beck

They teach children concepts such as writing poetry, the role that a “setting” plays in a narrative (by writing about their “dream” bedroom) and imagery and descriptive language (by writing about a food they love or hate).

The literacy programs serve 6,000 children, most in Chicago Public Schools, with curricula that Open Books experts write. The aim is to introduce topics that the children might not otherwise read about, such as animals, space exploration and historical figures who reflect their passions.

Open Books takes in more than 1 million books a year, including donations and those used in literacy outreach. Ninety percent of the students who Open Books serve are low-income, except in the Publishing Academy program for teens, where 60 percent attend on scholarship.

Ratner, by the way, still volunteers, serves on the board of directors, and works, as Johnson sees it, as Open Books' "chief graphic designer" for publicity materials. She also created the Literacenter, the nation's first shared workspace for non-profits dedicated to literacy.

Today, Open Books employs 20 and, on average, attracts 800 volunteers a year. It runs on an annual \$2 million budget. About half of the operating revenues come from the retail sales of used books, with the other half from private grants and gifts.

Open Books is always looking for volunteers, whether it's corporate groups or people on their own who want to work in the bookstores or work with children. The non-profit also takes monetary and book donations.

Anyone interested in donating or volunteering can contact Eric Johnson at ejohnson@open-books.org.

Sandra Guy is a local freelance writer.



Parents and other caregivers in the Austin community register their children for enrollment in the Imagination Library program.
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