

Rotary remains focused on literacy.(Springfield Extra)

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Springfield's two Rotary clubs began their focus on literacy eight years ago, when the Twin Rivers Rotary Club initiated a project to collect books from members to send to a Peace Corps volunteer in Russia. The books were distributed to a library and various schools in Kaliningrad, and they were the only English books the library had.

The project inspired the club to take on the nickname, "The Literacy Club." After learning the tremendous impact that reading skills at the third-grade level can have on a child's future, the club initiated a program distributing books to all Springfield third-graders.

A conversation between a club member who served as chairman of the Rotary District Literacy Committee and Carol Fellows from the Klamath Falls Rotary Club sparked the idea for another literacy project in Springfield.

Fellows was a key person in a book distribution project, "Klamath Cares, Klamath Reads," patterned after a similar effort in Casper, Wyo. The Casper project was begun by John Jorgenson in honor of his wife, Sue, a college teacher and avid supporter of literacy who was killed in a car wreck in 1996.

"Casper Reads, Casper Cares" gave new hardcover story books to all Casper first-grade students at an event featuring celebrity guest readers and other child-centered activities.

When Fellows learned of the idea, she worked with Rotary and community members to initiate a similar project in Klamath Falls. Her enthusiasm for the project led her to meet with representatives from the Springfield Public Schools and the two Springfield Rotary clubs.

The local Rotary clubs immediately adopted the project and began fundraising to support it.

In 2005, representatives from the school district, the two Springfield Rotary clubs and other Team Springfield agencies launched Gift of Literacy, using Lane Community College as the venue and bringing in Jorgenson as a featured speaker.

We're proud to say that today's event at LCC marks the third anniversary of Gift of Literacy, with nearly 1,000 Springfield first-graders receiving a book they chose from 10 available titles. The books will have their names in them and come with book bags the students can keep.

Jorgenson once again will be on hand to tell students about the program in fairy tale format, with his wife, Sue, as the queen. Readers from throughout the community will read the stories to students in small groups, and students will be able to take their books home to cherish.

For some, it may be the first new book they have ever owned.

Gift of Literacy continues to grow as more businesses and community organizations support it financially and with volunteers. The exciting event, which engages an entire grade level of readers from a wide variety of backgrounds, has now become a tradition in our community just as it has in Casper and Klamath Falls.

How wonderful for our children to know they have the support of the entire community behind them!

The legacy of The Literacy Club continues, and we hope to continue our mission of service to the community with other projects and partnerships that promote literacy and inspire young readers.

Bill Haynes is a member of the Gift of Literacy steering committee and the Twin Rivers Rotary Club.