

The Imagination Library: Bringing books to rural Albert County

Story and photos by Janet Wallace

"I like books!" says Owen, piling his favourite books on his bed. The three-year-old eagerly shows me his library.

His mother, Robin Stuart, fills in the back story. As part of the Imagination Library, Owen receives a book in the mail every month from birth until his 5th birthday.

"A friend of mine told me about the Imagination Library," says Robin. "She told me you can get a free book each month. It sounded amazing. And it is!"

The inspiration and force behind the program is country singer Dolly Parton. She wants to help children "fall in love with books at an early age," according to her website. The long-term goal is greater literacy.

The Imagination Library costs \$60 per child per year but the families don't foot the bill. Thanks to the Bennett and Albert County Health Care (BACH) Foundation, families in rural Albert County of all income levels have been able to use the free program since 2010.

By the time the children turn five years old and receive their last book, they will have received nearly fifty books from the Imagination Library.

"I loved books as a child," says Robin Stuart, "and I want my kids to have the chance to have their own books. As they get older, we'll probably pass on some of the books to their younger cousins, but I hope they will keep their favourite books and eventually even read those to their own children."

Robin Stuart reads to Owen and Liam. Owen is actively engaged in the story Where's My Nose? and is pointing at his own nose.

"The fact that the books come in the mail addressed to Owen," continues his mother, "makes it exciting for him."

Owen's four-month old brother, Liam, is also enrolled in the program. Each child receives books appropriate to their age, starting with heavy-duty 'board books' and ending with *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come!* Some contain tips for parents about how to use the book with their children including questions to ask while reading the book and afterwards.

Robin reads to both boys. While the baby is lulled by the sound of her reading, Owen is actively engaged and points out words he has learned. The books are kept on a low shelf in his room so he can look at the books whenever he wants. Sometimes, says Robin, he 'reads' to himself – flipping through the pages and recounting the story or making up a new one.

Another mother, Jenn Shelby, shares a similar story. Jenn learned about the program when she went for an



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appointment at the Albert County Health and Wellness Centre. Now, her four-year-old daughter is the proud owner of a great collection of books.

A writer and avid reader herself, Jenn admits that her daughter would have books even if she wasn't enrolled in the program. But she appreciates the diversity of books – a greater range of books than if she had bought them herself.

The program is particularly welcome in rural Albert County where there is just one library (Hillsborough), no bookmobile and limited access to bookstores, in addition to low literacy rates. There are 101 children enrolled in the program in school catchment areas for Riverside Consolidated and Hillsborough Elementary.

“The Imagination Library is particularly important now with so much of a focus on electronics,” says Dawn Parke, Coordinator for Imagination Library Anglophone East School District. “This program gives a child a real book to hold when they sit in the lap of their parent, grandparent, older brother or sister of whoever they love and cherish. That bond enhances the love of reading.”

“Many studies have shown that children exposed to books early in life have greater literacy skills,” she adds.

Beyond helping children to learn to read, the program may help build a healthier community. According to Public Health Agency of Canada (2013), effective childhood learning is a key contributor to health. Lower levels of education are linked with poor health, more stress, and lower self-confidence.

To learn more about the program or to sign up, you can pick up registration packages at the schools in Riverside-Albert and Hillsborough, the Hillsborough Library and the Albert County Health and Wellness Centre. If you have questions, feel free to call Dawn Parke, Coordinator for Imagination Library Anglophone East School District, at 874-3812 or email dawn.parke@nbed.nb.ca



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The Imagination Library helps children fall in love with books at an early age.

Connecting Albert County

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~ **www.ConnectingAlbertCounty.org.** *A website where local residents and visitors can discover and share stories about the people, environment, culture and news of rural Albert County.*

~ **Community Calendar.** *Online calendar for rural Albert County.*

~ **Monthly Newsletter** ~ *An emailed and print newsletter with stories, news, events, courses, job listings and more. See issues and subscribe at www.ConnectingAlbertCounty.org/e-bulletin.*

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