

Dolly Parton and Umatilla County

Program helps get books to children across the county

By Heather Estrada

For Go! Eastern Oregon

What do Dolly Parton and Umatilla County have in common? Well, they are both a little bit country, but more importantly, they both inspire children with a love of reading and learning from a very young age.

Dolly Parton began a foundation she named "Dolly Parton's Imagination Library" in 1995 to honor her father who could not read. She began it in her home county of Sevier in Tennessee. She gave a book, free of charge, to every child who enrolled from ages 0-5. She soon expanded to the state of Tennessee, and today, nearly 30 years later, her foundation sends books every month to more than 2 million children around the country and internationally as well.

This month the Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care committed to funding 50% of the costs for children across the state. While this is certainly excellent news, and the children in Umatilla County will benefit greatly from it, this is not the beginning of the story for the kids in our county.

Children under the age of 5 have had access to this exceptional program for six years. In 2018, several library directors in the county (most notably Cecili Longhorn from Stanfield and Mary Finney in Pendleton) were interested in enrolling children in their cities.

Working with Erin McCusker, the Umatilla County Special Library district director at the time, the Pendleton Friends of the Library used their nonprofit status and grants from



Enroll your child & give them
the gift of reading...**FREE!**

Heather Estrada/Contributed Image

Children enrolled in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library receive a free book every month from birth to age 5.

Umatilla County Electric, Pacific Power and other smaller donors to offer the program in Pendleton, Stanfield, Echo and Weston as funding allowed.

The program is truly amazing. Parents simply need to sign their children up online and a book is mailed to them, at no charge, every month until they turn 5.

The links to sign up can be found on each local library's website and at imaginationlibrary.com.

While there is no charge for families, today the Umatilla County funding comes jointly from the Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care and from the Blue Mountain United Way.

Early in 2022, the Blue Mountain United Way reached out to Erin McCusker and offered to fund the 50% necessary to ensure that children in all of Umatilla County could participate.

Today each child in Umatilla County has access to this program that not only increases book access but also helps parents create learning-rich environments in their home, supports brain and language development, increases parent-child bonding and fosters a

love of reading at an early age. There truly is no downside!

If you have a child under 5, or know one, register to join the 1,409 children currently receiving books in Umatilla County.

For more information, contact your local library or call the Umatilla County Special Library District at 541-276-6449.

Heather Estrada is
district director of the Umatilla
County Special Library District.

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