

Ashland Bookcase Project puts books in hands of youngsters

By MIKE BUETTNER T-G Staff Writer Published: May 2, 2017 4:00 AM



Bookcases, books and reading buddies await their new owners at the Ashland Bookcase Project awards ceremony at Trinity Lutheran Church on Sunday. (T-G photo/Steve Stokes)

Eighty local preschool children were part of an adventure Sunday that could benefit them for a lifetime. One by one as their names were called, the excited youngsters came forward at Jack's Place in Trinity Lutheran Church to claim something of their very own -- a solid oak bookcase filled with 50 new and gently used books.

Now in its sixth year, the Ashland Bookcase Project presents the bookcases crafted by carpenters, personalized with a nameplate and filled with age-appropriate reading material to children between the age of 3 and 5 years old in the local Head Start program.

Bookcase recipients also were given a Donald Duck stuffed toy reading buddy and a copy of Walt Disney's Classic Storybook to go with their new personalized prized possession.

"It's pretty neat," said Jabreea Jones of Ashland, whose son, Arjay Jones, 4, was a bookcase recipient. "It gives kids something to be excited about with reading." Jones said she reads to her sons Arjay and Jarron, 6, every night with books from the library. But the new bookcase and books will be something they can share. "My other son will be really excited as well," she said.

The project is intended to encourage early reading among kids not yet in kindergarten and to better prepare them for school.

"Basically, we ask the parents why their child would benefit and then the teachers make recommendations," said Donna Swartz, site supervisor for the local Head Start program. "This gets books and good literature into their hands. Hopefully it sparks the parents to read to them. All we ask is for them to read 20 minutes a day. By the end of the year, the child will have heard a million words."

Julia Wright, a retired psychologist and teacher, started the Ashland Bookcase Project after reading about a similar project in Arkansas -- A Bookcase For Every Child. In her job as a

psychologist, Wright had noticed that children who had problems reading often struggled in kindergarten and elementary school. "Illiteracy is really becoming a national problem," Wright said. "More people can't read in this country than you realize.

"If you can't read, you really are handicapped, and an emotional disability is very hard to overcome. When a child struggles in school, it's enough of a disability. Then they decide they can't learn and they're dumb. That's almost impossible to turn around."

Wright said since the inception of the bookcase project, teachers have reported children are much better prepared for kindergarten. And she has a couple favorite stories about children who have embraced reading.

"One boy told his mom she wasn't allowed to put books in the bookcase until she read the stories to him," she said. "Another boy told his mom they couldn't put the bookcase in his room until they cleaned up the room."

A project of this magnitude takes a team effort and this year was no different. The Career Center's construction technology program crafted 40 bookcases. Master carpenters of the Trinity Woodworkers Share Group made 30 bookcases, and under the guidance of the master carpenters and Scoutmaster Tim Muranski, Boy Scout Troop 521 of Jeromesville made 10 bookcases.

The Norma June Foundation also assisted with funding for the project.

"The community really has embraced this project," Wright said. "We have many volunteers doing things. ... We're the only program in Ohio and we've gotten it down to kind of a science."

Other contributors this year included Ashland County Homemakers, Delta Kappa Gamma teachers honorary society, **Ashland County Community Foundation**, Bendon Publishing, Bookmasters, Rotary Club of Ashland and several other generous individuals.

Wright even had several football players from Ashland University move the 4,000 books from two sites into the church.

A table of free extra books for older children was set up at Sunday's event so parents could select reading materials for siblings; retired teacher and principal Dave Kowalka used a puppet show to stress the importance of reading; and United Way director Stacy Schiemann talked about the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. "I bet there's going to be a lot of reading and going through every book tonight," Schiemann said. "Reading every day is one of the most important things we can do."

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