



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
June 6, 2008

“When I was growing up in the hills of East Tennessee, I knew my dreams would come true. I know there are children in your community with their own dreams... The seeds of these dreams are often found in books and the seeds you plant in your community can grow across the world.”

-Dolly Parton
(imaginationlibrary.com)

A couple of months ago I visited with Jinx Stapleton Watson, who recently retired from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. During our conversation - which covered children’s books, literacy, social justice issues and many other topics - she mentioned she is a member of the Library Committee for Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Since my knowledge of Dolly Parton was pretty much limited to knowing she sings and there is a place called Dollywood, I did some research about it when I got back from my trip.

I started on the National Childcare Information and Technical Assistance Center website (nccic.acf.hhs.gov), a service of the Child Care Bureau and a “national clearinghouse and technical assistance center that provides comprehensive child care information resources.” I discovered the Imagination Library is one of many children’s book distribution programs, including the Books for Kids Foundation,

Beginning with Books, Raising a Reader, Reach Out and Read, and many more. It is wonderful so many organizations and individuals continue to understand and support the connection between books and lifelong literacy.

From the NCCIC website I was led to the Dollywood Foundation, which supports the Imagination Library. I found out Dolly Parton launched the Imagination Library in 1996 for preschoolers in Sevier County, TN, where she grew up. In 2004 Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen established the Governor’s Books from Birth Foundation, which supports the efforts of other county Imagination Libraries in the state. Since October 2004 more than 4.9 million Imagination Library books have been delivered to Tennessee children and all of the 375,000 children in the state now have access to the Library. Each child who is registered receives a free hardback book in the mail every month, starting at birth and continuing until

continued on page 2

age five. In fact, in many communities hospital nurses register children for the program on the day they are born.

Since Penguin Group is a partner, the Library Committee chooses the books from the publisher’s extensive children’s titles. The first book is Watty Piper’s *The Little Engine that Could* (illustrated by Loren Long) and the final one is *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten*, written by Joseph Slate and illustrated by Ashley Wolff.

The success and popularity of this effort led Parton to offer to pay for books in communities outside of Tennessee, starting with Branson, Missouri and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Since then, cities and counties across the United States, and in Canada and the United Kingdom have started their own Imagination Libraries.

On the Imagination Library website are step-by-step instructions on replicating this

program. Local sponsors, like United Way, Chamber of Commerce, schools, education foundations and local businesses decide to bring the program to their community. According to the website, no town is too small or state too large to be involved, and the Dollywood Foundation supports them with publicity, mailings, book selection and ongoing collaboration opportunities.

Forty-two states have Imagination Libraries, including Alpine County and Turlock, California. I was happy to see that the one in Alpine County is sponsored locally by Alpine County Friends of the Library. As I mentioned in a previous column, it might be natural to think of bookstores and – in this case – book give-away programs as competition for libraries; however, it is joint efforts like this that lead to higher literacy rates and an increased pleasure in books for the children in our communities.