



(Photo by John Cook) Attendees at the Great Start Tuscola Imagination Library fundraiser on April 11 included (from left) Erin (Kischnick) Schmandt, Leah (Kischnick) Zuzula, Joy Scherzer and Matthew Bierlein. The event raised about \$23,775 for the program that sends a free book each month to about 2,000 children from birth to age 5 in the Tuscola County area.

THUMB KIDS USE THEIR IMAGINATION LIBRARY, BACKER SAYS

By Tom Gilchrist / May 1, 2019

Some children around Tuscola County still may appreciate snail mail, thanks to the Great Start Tuscola Imagination Library.

An April 11 fundraiser collected about \$23,775 for the project, which helps send a free book each month to about 2,000 children from birth to age 5 in the Tuscola County area.

“We’ve had a lot of anecdotal evidence from the parents about how great it is, and how excited the kids are, to go out to the mailbox, and how excited they are to get their new books,” said Erin Schmandt, library director at the Caro Area District Library and one of several hundred attendees at the fundraiser at the Knights of Columbus hall near Caro.

“They want to sit down and read the book over and over again,” added Schmandt, member of the board of directors of the Imagination Library.

The local free-book program, in its 10th year, receives greatly reduced costs from Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, launched in 1995 to foster a love of reading among preschool children and their families in Parton’s home county in Tennessee.

The program aims to mail high-quality, age-appropriate books to children’s homes. It costs about \$30 annually per child for the Great Start Tuscola Imagination Library to take part in the program.

“We are sending out some really nice books that could cost \$20 or \$25 apiece in the store, but there is no cost at all to the families here,” said Rachael Koepf, director of the Great Start Collaborative of Tuscola County, which plans the annual fundraiser.

Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library “has really worked on getting the cost low for shipping and handling, and the cost low for the purchase of the books, and without her covering that, I don’t know how we would ever do it,” said Koepf.

The first book each child receives is “The Little Engine That Could” by Watty Piper. Schmandt said it’s especially helpful when a parent or grandparent reads a book to a child.

“They have actually done testing showing physical books are actually better (than electronic devices) for kids’ brain development, because turning the pages, and actually having information read to them by a person – versus a device – makes more connections in their brain,” Schmandt said.

“If you’ve ever read any of the Imagination Library books, on the insides of the cover, they provide activities for the parents to do with the kids, such as asking them, ‘If what happened to the character in the book happened to you, how would you react?’

“So there’s more interaction with the parents, and more critical-thinking skills involved. And that’s really helpful.”

Schmandt said Imagination Library supporters hope to see if they can obtain data indicating whether the free-book program has improved children’s literacy.

“It’s a hard thing to track unless you’re testing the kids’ literacy ahead of time, and then after the fact,” Schmandt said. “So that’s something we’ve been working on with Wayne State University to try to track that.”

The April 11 fundraiser, featuring Tommy Fulcher as master of ceremonies and music by Eclectic Junction, included food, beverages and dessert, along with a live auction, silent auction and raffles.

“We need to raise about \$60,000 a year to operate this program and that’s only done through fundraising, donations and sponsors,” Koepf said.

Great Start Tuscola Imagination Library books go to children attending or planning to attend schools in the nine local school districts in the Tuscola Intermediate School District: Akron-Fairgrove, Cass City, Caro, Kingston, Mayville, Millington, Reese, Unionville-Sebewaing Area and Vassar.

“We have a lot of bordering counties that do not have this program, so when I have a family that calls and lives on, let’s say, Bay City-Forestville Road in (Sanilac County) but their kids are going to attend our schools, I still allow them to get books,” Koepf said.

“We don’t want to really turn kids down. If they’re going to attend a Tuscola County school in the future, we say ‘Yes, we’ll get you books.’”

Parents of children from birth to age 5 can register their children for the book program by visiting www.imaginationlibrary.com. Once children turn 5, they graduate from the program.

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