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Alyssa Cares gives books to students

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Tom Munds

Eyes shined and faces broke out in ear-to-ear smiles Oct. 21 as Hay Elementary School students got their first look at the book display where each child could select one to add to his or her personal library.

This marked the first of three visits to Hay by the Alyssa Cares Foundation to make sure every student is able to select at least one book.

"Our daughter Alyssa loved reading and loved books," Joe Hemmelgarn, who joined his wife, Carole, in establishing the foundation, said as he watched the children mulling over which book to pick. "Our daughter passed away last year after complications from leukemia. We sought to bring something positive out of our tragedy and established the foundation to honor her memory by distributing books to children who may not have many books at home."

The foundation's mission is "to inspire and encourage a life-long excitement and passion for literacy by putting books in the hands and homes of children in need."

Each grade at Hay Elementary came to the room set up for the Oct. 21 book distribution. Books available ranged from Harry Potter to the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis and, for younger children, books with more pictures, such as "The Dirty Dog."

The children were encouraged to handle and check out the books, possibly thumbing through and reading passages of them before finally making a selection.

It didn't take Mitchel Johnson, a Hay fifth-grader, long to make his selection and he held tightly to his bag containing his latest Goosebumps book.

"This is cool. I've got another Goosebumps book. I just love the Goosebumps books," he said pointing to his new book. "Goosebumps is a series and I have read a whole lot of them. It is really nice these people give us the chance to pick a book we can keep for our collection. I think it's special because I like books, I love to read and I appreciate adding a book to the ones I have at home."

Carole Hemmelgarn talked to the kindergartners as they came in to choose their books.

She told them about the books available, a little about her daughter and why the Lone Tree family established the foundation to give away books.



Above, Lone Tree resident Carole Hemmelgarn, left, talks about a book with Hay Elementary School kindergartners Haley Givens and Aallyha Medina, Oct. 21 when the Alyssa Cares Foundation offered each Hay student the opportunity to select a book to add to the collection at home. The Hemmelgarn family established the Alyssa Cares Foundation that will make book-distribution visits to four schools in the metro area this year. Right, fifth-grader Taden Blaise, left, looks over the book he has selected with Alyssa Cares Foundation volunteer Andrew Thurman. Far right, kindergartners check out their new books. Photos by Tom Munds

"I love doing this, providing an opportunity for children to own books and take them home," she said. "Studies show children with a lot of books in the home tend to be more successful in their classes."

She watched the young children and talked to several, helping them make a selection.

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she talked about the feeling of being with the children and hopefully helping promote their love for reading and books.

"As Joe said, our daughter loves to read and loved books," Carole said. "I feel by providing children books we are continuing our daughter's legacy and her love of reading. If our efforts help one child learn to love books and reading, everything we have done is worth it."

Each table was stocked with books selected for a specific grade level. Carole said she read every book on display so she can talk to children about any specific book to help the child decide on a selection.

The tables were also staffed by children who were relatives or friends of the Hemmelgarn family.

"This is the first time I've been able to come to a book distribution and it's pretty cool," said Andrew Thurman, Alyssa's cousin.

"It makes me feel good to help put books in the hands of kids who may not have the chance to own many books. I like books, like to read and I like to help a boy or girl make a selection so they leave here with a book they can read and enjoy over and over. When a guy or girl picks a good book and smiles as they leave, it makes me feel good and I just hope they will learn to love reading as much as I do."

The foundation counts on public and private donations to purchase nearly 2,000 books, which they expect to distribute this year.

This year, the first for the foundation. They will visit four elementary schools in the metropolitan area. They visit each school three times, once in the fall, once just before the Christmas break and once just before school ends for the summer. The idea is to bring new books so the children will continue to read during the breaks in the school year, Joe Hemmelgarn said. Carole agreed and added the goal of the foundation is to expand the program so they can visit schools around Colorado and possibly establish similar programs in other states.

For information about the Alyssa Cares Foundation, its history and its book distribution program, go to the Web site at www.alyssacares.org.

At a glance

- Family created foundation in memory of daughter, 9
- Foundation promotes Alyssa's legacy of love of books and reading

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