



Birthday book library program blooms

By Eliza Ridgeway, Town Crier Staff Writer

Birthday tradition in Los Altos has taken a literary turn, adding books to the cakes, presents and cards that mark the day.

Two parent volunteers hatched the idea at Almond Elementary School two years ago, suggesting that parents donate a new book to the school library to commemorate their child's birthday. A nameplate is affixed inside to celebrate the student and his or her birth date.

Project founders Jane Sanders and Karen Shannon served on the library committee for several years and watched with dismay as state funding for new library books diminished. Other communities tried the birthday books program and the two volunteers decided to start one at Almond.

The plan started small, with a notice in the school information packet asking parents to donate \$15 to \$25 in honor of each child's birthday. The program took off quickly - Sanders and Shannon raised \$4,000 the first year. Now in its third year, the program received more than \$6,000 in September.



Joe Hu/Town Crier Almond Elementary School parents Karen Shannon, right, and Jane Sanders have taken the fledgling library at Edison McNair Academy under their wing, filling the shelves with fiction.

The work is time intensive, because the parent volunteers buy more than 600 books every year, cover them and paste in the nameplates.

"It's this constant load, but it's fun because we get to see what's being published and stay on top of it," Shannon said.

The birthday committee selects the books based on their research.

"We try to find high-interest popular fiction that is still kind of literate," Shannon said.

They stretch the birthday dollars by clipping coupons, shopping online and at discount book buyers. Library books don't last as long as those in a home collection - a paperback is lucky to last a year.

A Santa Rita librarian met with Shannon and Sanders to start a similar program at Santa Rita Elementary School, and the idea is beginning to spread.

"Why not do this at the public library, too, and all the school libraries?" said Los Altos School District Trustee Margot Harrigan. "What a great thing for a kid to walk into the library and see their name on a book."

What started as a celebration of reading and birthdays has grown into something more: a project bringing a wealth of books to schools that can use the boost. With help from the non-profit East Palo Alto Kids Foundation, Sanders and Shannon have taken their book program prowess to Edison McNair Academy, an East Palo Alto charter school that, up until now, had no library.

The Edison McNair library project is fed from a number of Los Altos sources: residents Laura Roberts and Julie Mahowald, on the Kids Foundation board; Sanders and Shannon, who have been buying, organizing and shelving books for the school with foundation funding, and Tanner Hanson and Sahil Luthra, of Los Altos Boy Scout Troop 30, who have chosen the school for their Eagle projects. Hanson is building shelving for the library, while Luthra wants to design and build a school Web site.

These library champions are looking for a local retailer to donate materials to build the bookcases, and potential donors for the next phase of book purchases at Edison McNair, Roberts said.

All area schools have experienced library cutbacks, but Shannon said that spending time in East Palo Alto showed her a population of students ripe for increased reading opportunities.

"It's been kind of an eye opener," Shannon said. "The only way to become a better reader is to read. At McNair there are about 600 books for 400 kids. When you've only got that many books, it's hard to find something that everybody is going to like."

She pointed out that, in comparison, Almond, with a similar number of students, has almost 15,000 books. Through their work with the Kids Foundation, the Edison McNair collection has grown to about 4,000 volumes.

For more information about joining or starting a birthday book program, contact your local school. For more information about the East Palo Alto Kids Foundation, visit www.epak.org.

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