



Year In Review 2008

The Dollywood Foundation

A funny thing happened along the way to one of the most financially distressing years in history – Dolly's Imagination Library experienced a record year by almost any measure. Another 240 communities joined the effort, pushing the total number of participating communities to 950 and the total number of children to 496,000 in three countries. In 2008, almost 5.5 million books were mailed and the total mailed since program inception soared to 17.1 million books!

While the numbers are impressive the people are even more so. There really is no way to accurately count all of the thousands of local volunteers working hard every day to fund the effort, register the kids, manage the database, collect the books and promote strategies to better prepare their children for a life full of learning. Is it 10,000 or 100,000 or 500,000 people? While the number may be hard to pin down, it is abundantly clear that in each community we find caring and compassionate individuals that have so generously adopted Dolly's Imagination Library as their own.

In Tennessee, the program serves every child under five years of age. In Canada's Yukon Territories, the provincial government works with the Rotary Club to follow this model, consistently serving every resident child. Other states are moving toward this impressive level of coverage.

The state of West Virginia has expanded the number of counties it funds; the Aloha United Way, Read to Me International, and the University of Hawaii's Center on the Family came together to form a partnership to work for a statewide adoption of the program; and in Georgia, the Ferst Foundation and Rotary will soon announce their plans for a statewide program.

In the United Kingdom, an entirely new operation was established—new books, new mail service, new post office and a new director was hired to lead the effort. In all, over 6,000 children were enrolled and verbal commitments were reached with four additional communities to launch in 2009.

The Tennessee Board of Regents released a study which asked kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers to rate children on several learning attributes. Not surprisingly, the study found that those children participating in Dolly's Imagination Library consistently performed better in these areas.

This homegrown effort has now grown into a substantial international program that utilizes a sophisticated database, three mailing services, two publishers, three postal systems and a thousand different local partnerships to do what was once only dreamt – to make sure every child has the opportunity to love books and to love reading.

The spirit of this dream was authentically portrayed in the newly released Canadian documentary, *The Book Lady*, which follows, with the help of Invest in Kids, the Imagination Library's introduction into Canada. The film rarely mentions what should be learned but instead captures what moves people, what inspires people and what people love to do. As one little fellow says in the film "Reading is my hobby." Not bad for a four year old.