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Providing thousands of recycled books for Chicagoland area children, the Bernard P. Floriani Foundation promotes youth literacy development one book at a time.

Supplying the

Literary Lifeblood

When considering the basic needs of life, many people think of food, shelter, clothing, and perhaps love. Brian Floriani, Executive Director of the Lake Forest-based Bernard P. Floriani Foundation, also includes books in that select list.

After Brian's father, Dr. Bernard Floriani, unexpectedly passed away at the age of 58 in the fall of 2005, Brian first developed the idea of starting a foundation in his father's memory. "It was one of those things where you're in total shock, and you have to do something," Brian says. "You realize that there is a hole that's never going to go away, and you have an option: You can fill it with a bunch of junk, you can ignore it and pretend it's not there...or you can make something good come out of it."

By 2006, Brian—with the help of his mother, wife, mother- and father-in-law, and his siblings and

their spouses—had founded the Bernard P. Floriani Foundation in California. Initially, the goal of the foundation was to raise money for various "orphan charities"—charities that receive little recognition and aid for their work. Despite their successful efforts to raise \$25,000 for the Prader-Willi Research Foundation, Brian felt uncertain about his organization's broad endeavors. "We needed to do something tangible and something specific," he says. "Not having a specific mission...just wasn't good enough."

At the time, Brian was working as a golf professional in South Carolina, and his wife, Jillian, remained living in California for a while before also relocating to South Carolina in 2008. Brian ultimately decided to quit the golf profession, and the couple moved back home to Lake Forest shortly after discovering that they were expecting a baby—

Zoë Read Floriani—who would be born in March 2009. Originally planning to get his teaching certificate, Brian secured a job as a reading paraprofessional at Shiloh Park School in Zion, where he worked with children who struggled with reading. The job had a profound effect on him.

"What pained me was...although I was helping these kids, I thought, 'What are we doing to prevent this?'" Brian says. "And it just wore on me and wore on me. After my experience, I thought [that] if we could just change this a little bit, we could have a profound effect on the rest of their lives."

By August of 2009, the Bernard P. Floriani Foundation, which will eventually be renamed "Bernie's Book Bank," was restructured with a new, specific focus on promoting literacy through the efforts of collecting and redistributing children's books. Within a one-month span, the foundation was able

BRIAN AND JILLIAN FLORIANI
WITH DAUGHTER ZOË





VOLUNTEERS SORT CHILDREN'S BOOKS INTO AGE-APPROPRIATE CATEGORIES AT THE FOUNDATION'S LIBERTYVILLE WAREHOUSE.

to collect 40,000 books to distribute to children. Unlike most other not-for-profit organizations, which often facilitate book drives but do not focus exclusively on collecting books, the Floriani family has made children's book collecting and redistribution their expertise.

While the process of recycling books is a fairly simple one, it still involves plenty of effort, Brian says. After collecting unwanted children's books from libraries, book clubs, prosperous schools, and individuals or families, volunteers clean up and level the books by separating them into age-appropriate categories at the foundation's Libertyville warehouse. Each book is marked with a "fingerprint," a label bearing the foundation's name and contact information, before being placed in a bag with five other books. The bags, packed in boxes, are then sent directly to the place where they will be redistributed. The foundation distributes books through schools and often supplements not-for-profit organizations with their book needs. "[We supply books to] basically any organization that agrees that reading is the most important skill that a child learns and that [ensures] that these books will go into the hands of the kids immediately," he says.

The Bernard P. Floriani Foundation has distributed books through organizations such as Teen Mother Choices, the United Way, and North Chicago Community Partners. Other local associations, such as Mothers for Others, have become involved with the foundation by working as volunteers in the warehouse. "Our volunteers to us—to my family—are gold," Brian says. "And my goal with any volunteer that comes on board is to treat them like family."

Brian's passion for his cause may be exceeded only by the joy in the faces of the children who receive the foundation's books. He has observed an excited boy eagerly line up his new books on his desk, and a young girl proudly carry her donated books around in the bag weeks after receiving them. Seeing these types of reactions has emphasized the importance of the foundation's mission for Brian. "If you can make what we're doing analogous to a blood bank, I really believe that these books can be the lifeblood for these children's futures," he says.

While the foundation's efforts have been focused primarily in the Chicagoland area, Brian hopes to eventually see its work spread beyond the surrounding region. Recently, he has communicated with Starbucks representatives to arrange 26 book drops at North Shore Starbucks locations for the spring of 2010, and he is currently working to increase that number of Starbucks locations, as well as the number of monthly book drops. His ultimate goal is to collect 250,000 books throughout the course of the year.

Although Brian considers his work to be challenging, he also believes it to be entirely worthwhile. "At the end of the day, it's so rewarding," he says. "I'm not a non-profit guru...all I know is that a huge burden rests on my heart with regards to my father and these children, and that drives me."

For more information on the Bernard P. Floriani Foundation, or to donate books, call 847-482-0754, or visit www.bernardpflorianifoundation.org. **reb**

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