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### **Book bank with Lake Forest ties looks to get children to read**

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Life opportunities begin to disappear for children who arrive at the kindergarten door having never touched a book, a problem Brian Floriani hopes to obliterate with book donors, volunteers at Bernie's Book Bank, and gifts of books to children.

Bernie's Book Bank -- which just opened a warehouse in Lake Forest -- places six books in a bag into the hands of school children twice a year to get them started on the pleasures and elementary lessons which come from having one's own book.

"Books are non-negotiable in a successful educational journey," said Floriani, the non-profit's executive director. "One skill you need for success is the ability to read proficiently. If we wait until they're six years old, their future has already been determined for them."

Bernie's Book Bank conducted 58 book drives last year, accepts book donations, assembles volunteers to examine them for condition, puts the books in a bag, and distributes them to children in schools. Floriani said their organization, named for his father, tries to simplify the logistics of getting used books to children who would not otherwise get them and to keep doing it.

To raise money to expand and keep going, Floriani encourages Lake County supporters to turn out for the Bank's fund-raiser offering food, fun, live music, dancing and entertainment.

His "Rock the Bank! Benefit" is from 5:30 to 11 p.m. June 17 at Bernie's Book Bank, 28101 Ballard Avenue, Unit A, in Lake Forest ([www.berniesbookbank.org](http://www.berniesbookbank.org)).

'Good time'

"It should be a pretty amazing event," he said. "People don't have to wear a black tie. They can hang out in blue jeans and have a good time."

Funds will support the more than 200 volunteers in the new Lake Forest-based warehouse facility who collect, process and distribute 8,000 to 20,000 books a week. They are building toward their year 2013 goal to annually distribute 1 million books in the Chicago area. The books are now distributed

throughout Lake and Cook counties from Zion to Hinsdale. So far, 210,000 books have been distributed to 30,000 children since Bernie's Book Bank got started in late 2009.

"I think they're doing a good job," said Book Bank volunteer and Deerfield Public Library Youth Librarian Meg Anthony. "The way Bernie's Book Bank gives out the books, it's very celebratory."

She urges people to consider donating books and to become volunteers themselves to help get books of all kinds ready to give to school children.

"There are lots of ways for people to help," she said.

Area librarians and a visiting book author say the impact of early book reading, by borrowing or ownership, is significant, not only for building the readiness to learn but also for influencing one's career.

Highwood Public Library Director Tony Molaro said, "Children who have books before the age of seven are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college."

"Absolutely, adamantly important," said Cindy L. Fuerst, director of the Vernon Area Public Library District. "Those are very formative years. Books are very tangible and real. You can chew on books and hold them. Picture books are the first introduction to art. They are gorgeous—many styles, colors, shapes and forms. It's important that they are part of their environment."

Pulitzer Prize finalist and author of "The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn" Nathaniel Philbrick said of his childhood books, "They were not just books, they were my friends growing up and meant everything to me."

He still has his childhood books even though he is now doing author visits with library audiences, such as 7 p.m. May 5 at the Highland Park Public Library, to talk about books he has written about American history.

'Every page'

"A while ago," he said, "my mother gave me a stack of the books I had as a little kid and I was amazed at how clearly I still remembered each and every page of them."

Librarian Fuerst remembers her mother reading "Cinderella" to her as a child. Molaro said his family was always reading, and he too remembers his mother reading to him as a three or four year old. Anthony said her mother, a librarian, was reading to her at an early age, such as "Need a House? Call Ms. Mouse!" by George Mendoza.

"I still own it," Anthony said. "Books as gifts is a great idea. I think it was a factor for me getting into library work. My interest in literature, children's literature, and my mom led me to library work. I think the literature was my foundation."

Brian Floriani started Bernie's Book Bank in response to his experience as a reading interventionist in the Zion School District as he was getting his teaching degree. He saw that he could have a bigger impact on a child's readiness to read from outside the educational system by delivering the gift of book ownership to youngsters. Children with whom he was 'intervening' were not ready to read when they got to school, he found. They did not know the difference between letters and numbers, for example.

Book Bank volunteer Meg Anthony said reading readiness includes such things as knowing text is read from left to right, words relate to pictures, holding the book the proper way is important, a story has a narrative and characters.

“Studies have shown that children with books at home become better readers,” she said.

Floriani said the June 17 benefit evening will allow them to display the new Lake Forest facility and show visitors how volunteers do what they do. He is not in the business of buying books for distribution. His operation takes donations, categorizes them into four age groups (babies to two years of age, two to three, four, and five to six) and recycles bundles of six books to children who should get them.

“Books that leave our warehouse are of high quality and ones we know will inspire,” he said.

Volunteer Catherine Driscoll said, “We identify schools where 50 percent of the children or more are on the free and assisted lunch program.”

That assures Bernie’s Book Bank they are reaching children whose parent’s are unlikely to be buying books for their children.

Floriani said, “When I started this, what I saw was a huge need, and I thought of how book drives have been done in the past.”

Book drives are hard to organize, occur occasionally, and require a lot of room for book storage. Then there is the follow-through to get them into the hands of children who need them.

“I thought if we could create a model like a food bank, the potential was unlimited,” Floriani said. “On faith, I started it. You’ve just got to start and keep building from there. And, that’s what we’ve done.”

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