

# Tampa Bay Times

## Pasco school programs put free books in hands of needy children

By Megan Hussey, Times Correspondent

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A few years ago, staff and PTA members at Seven Oaks Elementary in Wesley Chapel noticed that some students were unable to participate in the yearly Scholastic Book Fair.

"It was so sad," said Charla Palmer, media specialist at Seven Oaks Elementary. "Teachers didn't want kids who couldn't buy books to be embarrassed, so they'd sometimes ask them to stay back in the classroom during the book fair. Other kids were told they could just look at the books."

Three years ago, Palmer joined forces with the PTA to make sure that no Seven Oaks student would leave the book fair empty handed.

"The PTA felt that if a child was not able to participate in the fair, then we should ensure that every child who wants a book, gets a book," said Ana DaSilva-Bernie, PTA president.

Getting involved with Scholastic Book Fairs' national All for Books program, Seven Oaks Elementary this year raised \$2,418 toward the purchase of 970 books from Scholastic. That's one book for every child at the school. Through this program, schools generate funds for the purchase of books for their disadvantaged students. For every dollar raised, Scholastic donates one book to an organization that helps needy children around the world.

Due to this year's Seven Oaks Books for All donation, facilitated through PTA fundraisers that include family movie nights and cookie dough sales, 2,400 books will be sent to the Kids In Need Foundation and Kids in Distressed Situations Inc.

"We want the kids to understand the great need in our own community," said Danielle Biggs, treasurer of the Seven Oaks PTA as well as a teacher and parent at the school.

The free books, handpicked by Palmer and PTA members, were delivered to the students last week in their classrooms.

"As a teacher, I see the benefits of reading to my students," Biggs said. "As a parent, I see how excited my kids are when they get free books."

And, according to Denise Nicholas, first vice president of the Seven Oaks PTA, that's the whole point.

"We do all this for the kids," she said. "They're the ones who really matter."

Kids at Northwest Elementary in Hudson also are learning the value of reading and giving the gift of literacy.

Northwest students recently sent 410 books to students in Papua New Guinea as part of the school's yearly participation in the OCHO Project: Read for a Need. In this program, now in its fifth year at Northwest, students

pledge to read eight books to earn three to five free books that they can select at a schoolwide book fair. After the kids enjoy these books over the summer, school counselor Lisa Peart asks them to bring back the books to be donated to needy kids across the world, in areas such as Africa, India, Vietnam — and this year, Papua New Guinea, a Pacific island nation that has a 56 percent literacy rate.

"When I first learned about the OCHO Project: Read for a Need, I thought it would be great for our school because I knew many of our students did not have books of their own at home to read," Peart said. "At the first OCHO free book fair, the students were so excited and could not believe the books were free!"

Peart said this project carries long-term benefits for Northwest students.

"During the school year, our students have access to a ton of books in our library, but over the summer some families do not have access or transportation to the public library and a lot of students do not have many books at home," she said. "That is why we hold the free book fair the week before school is out, so that we ensure that every student is going home with three to five books so they can keep reading over the summer."

And they learn to give back.

Children's author Marilyn Perlyn, creator of the OCHO Project, travels to member countries to deliver the books. She sends photos and stories from her trips to Peart, who shares the tales and images of life in Papua New Guinea with the students at Northwest.

"Our students get to come to a school with a beautiful library and advanced technology like iPods and iPads for them to use," Peart said. "Some of the schools we have donated books to in other countries don't even have electricity or any books at their school, and seeing this helps our students appreciate all that they do have."

"The greatest moment is when I show the students pictures from the other countries and they recognize a book they donated in the hands of a student half way across the world!"

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