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A book a month club

*By Dale Moss
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Evie Boofter turned 1 year old and her little friends brought gifts.

They left with something, as well.

Evie's mother, Aleah Boofter, insisted that parents of the partygoers register, right then and there, for a program in which their sons and daughters receive a free book monthly until they are 5. Really, it's true, Boofter was quick to say.

And really, it's a godsend, Boofter said she believes.

"You can't have too many books for your child," she said.

The one with the books is the one with the, well, voice. Floyd County is but among the latest of more than 1,000 communities or counties to join Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Parton established it 14 years ago where she grew up, in Tennessee, and Mary Ann Adkins, another parent in Floyd, joins Boofter and others to spread the word in Floyd.

"Everybody's so suspicious," Adkins said. "There's got to be strings attached or a contract to sign. But there's not."

Absolutely every under-5 child, at least 4,300 in Floyd, is indeed eligible. If only each who is realizes.

Most areas, about 70 percent end up enrolled. Floyd wants more, cherishes disciples such as Boofter and Adkins. Meanwhile, applications are being distributed at the hospital, at schools, at day-care centers, at gathering places such as the public library, the YMCA and The Salvation Army. Online enrollment is also available.

"We're signing up children left and right," said Becky King, the local program's leader. "We don't want to miss any."

The first books are to arrive next month while sign-ups continue. King said books are tried-and-true children's literature, pillars for all home libraries chosen by a Parton-established foundation.

She said the first book sent is "The Little Engine That Could," Parton's favorite.

Free books cost someone, of course. Most notably, Horseshoe Foundation of Floyd County contributes \$75,000 and Community Alliances to Promote Education (CAPE), for which King works, is in for \$31,600. The expense is believed an investment.

Jerry Finn, director of the Horseshoe Foundation, imagines parents and children reading together, benefitting together. Children should become more self-confident, Finn figures. Adults might be inspired to return to school.

Plus test scores always can use a boost. Expect some eventual improvement, King said.

She reminds that the home is the first classroom and parents the first teachers. "So much learning takes place before a child walks in the door of school," King said.

As an elementary-school counselor, Boofter sees routinely the value of reading. Students who struggle with words tend to struggle with numbers, with all subjects. Boofter said she has read to Evie since her birth.

"I don't think it's ever too early," mom said.

Only the youngest of Adkins' six children – 4-year-old twins – qualify. Yet much better late than ever, Adkins said of the program. "One book, we can utilize it until I have grandchildren," she said.

CAPE already conducts workshops on behalf of children and families. It will coordinate more and similar efforts, intended to help people make the most of the books being distributed. Finn said a goal is an online tutorial.

Boofter's goal is that she and her daughter fetch together each month's book from the mailbox.

"It will be sort of our ritual," she said.

Children in Harrison County also receive Imagination Library books. Participation there is at that 70 percent norm.

"It's gone extremely well," said Steve Gilliland of Harrison's Community Foundation.

To register in Floyd or to learn more, call the CAPE office at 542-4001 or go to www.imaginationlibrary.com on the Internet.

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