

Gift of Literacy a day of joy for first-graders, and others

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The adults were pretty excited about the day.

So you can only imagine how excited the first-graders were.

For the fifth year, all Springfield first-grade students got to visit Lane Community College last Thursday as part of the Gift of Literacy.

As if the bus trip to LCC by itself wasn't exciting enough, students were greeted by famous book characters like Clifford the Big Red Dog and the Wild Thing.

Once inside a lecture hall, the excitement level stayed high. Students were presented individualized Gift of Literacy bags. The bags were opened at the same time, revealing a new book for each student — and a loud chorus of screams.

What could top getting a new book? Having someone read it to you, of course. Students split into different rooms and community volunteers read the books.

The day ended with students having lunch with characters from the books before heading back to the buses.

John Jorgensen started "Wyoming Reads" program after which the Gift of Literacy is modeled, and came to LCC to talk about how he and his children started the program to remember his late wife, Sue.

"This is the best day of the whole year," said Jorgensen, who later acted out a story of a character he invented called Good Queen Sue. "I came all the way from Wyoming to celebrate with you today. I'm so excited to be here."

After giving a talk about the importance of reading, Jorgensen asked students to promise to read throughout the summer.

"If you do, the good queen will look down and be happy," he said.

Jorgensen wasn't the only adult with high enthusiasm for the day. Nancy Golden, Springfield's superintendent, was among the others taking part.

"I think it's amazing how it grows every year," Golden said of the Gift of Literacy program. "It's my favorite day of the year. What could be better than kids being so excited about books? I love when the first-graders come out to LCC and the college kids look at them, wondering what the heck is going on."

Earlier in the school year, students had a chance to pick one of 10 books. Many didn't know exactly what would be happening last Thursday.

"It was fun," said Lesley Richardsen, a first-grader at Riverbend Elementary who chose "Looking for Miza" as her book. "I liked seeing all the costume people. I really like Clifford. I watch him on TV. He's bigger than everybody else."

Classmate Brendan Stone admitted to being surprised when



Photo by Craig Murphy/Springfield Times

The Wild Thing greets first grade students during the Gift of Literacy program last Thursday at Lane Community College.



Photo by Craig Murphy/Springfield Times

First graders open their bags and take out their new books last Thursday at the Gift of Literacy event at Lane Community College.



Photo by Craig Murphy/Springfield Times

Bob Keefer with Willamalane Parks and Recreation District (in back) reads to first grade students last Thursday as part of the Gift of Literacy program at Lane Community College.

exiting the bus.

"We didn't know any of the mascots would be here," Stone said. "I especially like Wild Thing."

Local author Judy Sierra wrote "Born to Read," one of the 10 books on the list. She helped read at the request of Nancy Bigley, a Rotary member who is also chair of the Springfield School Board.

"I think it's great," Sierra said of reading to students. "It's absolutely fantastic. The more I read my book out loud, the more important it is to see the responses (of students). It helps me with future books."

"As long as I'm in town, I will be back to do this again," Sierra added. "There are certain events that are so much fun, you want to keep doing them. This is one of them."

Ed Baker with Twin Rivers Rotary and the Springfield Education

Foundation noted the hope is to expose more communities to the program. Representatives from Creswell, Lebanon and Pleasant Hill were on hand to check out last week's program. In addition, local Rotary members will be displaying the project at an international Rotary conference later this month.

"I just wish we could expand this throughout the county," Baker said. "We'll take it one piece at a time. We have a good bunch of sponsors that help us out."

Bigley loved being able to read to students.

"I couldn't sleep last night," she said with a grin. "This is my favorite time of the year, hands down. It's a perfect fit for me. I was the kind of kid that always wanted to read. It was the same with my kids. To see that enthusiasm in the face of kids today is pure pleasure."