

BOOKS FOR KIDS

Holly Jolly Reading collection Thursday

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New Opportunities' Family Development Center soon will be dispersing gifts to Carroll County families so that on Christmas morning hundreds of children will have the joy of unwrapping toys, clothes and more.

And as those families visit the Family Development Center, they also will have the opportunity to select something extra that may have the longest-lasting and most-meaningful impact in the kids' lives — the gift of reading.

Thanks to the annual Holly Jolly Reading drive, spearheaded by Luanne Kustra of Carroll, Family Development Center will have an abundant collection of books for families to peruse at the same time they're receiving their Christmas presents.

To build up that supply of books for kids of all ages — infants through teens — Kustra will be conducting a special Holly Jolly Reading collection from 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 13, in the parking lot at Godfather's Pizza, 628 Highway 30 West. Holly Jolly Reading is asking for donations of new books or used ones that may be just a little worn. Cash donations also may be given for Kustra to buy books.

Kustra said her goal is to deliver at least 500 books to New Opportunities in order to enhance the Christmastime selection.

"It sure makes you feel good to know that kids are getting books at Christmastime when they're picking up their gifts," Kustra said. "They need the coats and hats and boots and things, but then the families

can also pick out books."

Kustra, a social worker at St. Anthony Nursing Home, credits her daughter, Katie, with inspiring the launch of the Holly Jolly Reading program years ago when Katie was a student at St. Lawrence Catholic Grade School. Kustra recalled that Katie wanted to make sure that all kids could have books available to them at Christmastime and throughout the year.

Katie, a 2012 Kuemper Catholic High School and 2016 University of Northern Iowa graduate, now lives in Indianola with her husband, Mitchell Sparks, and their 18-month-old son, Andrew. However, Luanne has continued to author success of Holly Jolly Reading.

"For Katie, she loved spending time at the library. She loved to read," Kustra said. "And I just think reading helps kids with their education, it helps them to explore and look into the arts and different things. I think kids need reading to develop their imaginations. A lot of those books are very educational and really make a difference."

Holly Jolly Reading's main campaign is at Christmastime, but the donations actually come in year-round. Kustra said people in the community drop off donations at her home all times of the year. She said that overall she delivers as many as 600 to 700 books a year to New Opportunities.

Kristin Grossman, who became Family Development Center's new director this year, said she's looking forward to her first Christmas at her office, but she's already seen kids' reactions after a book drive over the summer.

"We had kids leaving here

with stacks of books," she said. "They were just over the moon about it."

Books are especially welcome at Christmas break and during summer vacation when kids can spend extra time with them.

"So being able to take those books home, read them whenever they feel like it and not having to worry about taking them back, yes, kids definitely get excited about the books we have," Grossman said.

She went on, "It really helps all of our clients, from newborns to 18 and even some adults, depending on the books we get. It's a huge benefit because you can learn so much from reading, whether it's a little kids' book or chapter book for adults. Reading is something people can always benefit from. We give all our books out for free. We're really grateful to Luanne for everything she does in getting us those books and helping our clients."

Grossman said books can help improve reading skills and school performance, spark imagination and nurture bonding between children and their parents.

Those books not given out at Christmastime will remain available in the Family Development Center's clothing closet, open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

"Those are available for free because you can't put a price on reading and books and education," Grossman said.



Luanne Kustra