

Free books for young kids: Dolly Parton Imagination Library expands in Rochester

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a nonprofit that mails books to kids younger than 5 years old.

In Rochester, the program is expanding to cover the entire city.

Parents can sign up online, and a new, age-appropriate book comes in the mail once a month.

It's a free service, and research shows the program helps children learn to read.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a nonprofit that sends children free books in the mail, is now available to every child under age 5 in the city of Rochester.

The local chapter started on a small scale in July 2021 in two northeast Rochester ZIP codes. About 800 children are participating, according to chapter founder Matt Present.

Now, with support from a number of local charities, the library is expanding throughout the city. Parents can sign up at rochesterimaginationlibrary.org. An new, age-appropriate book will come in the mail once a month, free of charge.

Qwaybayanna Flowers' 4-year-old son Jamel is one of the current participants in the program. She said she appreciates it because COVID-19 made her reluctant to take him to the public library.

"He likes ABC books, color books — he basically likes to read anything," she

said. "He has his own books, and he's learning a lot. ... They say at school he's very smart."

Patricia McDonald Uttaro 
@Patriciau36 · [Follow](#)

I am so excited! Dolly Parton's Imagination Library will be available to *every child* in the [#roc](#)! Research shows having books at home is a contributor to later success in school. This is so important to our children.
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The Rochester, NY chapter of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Every month, we mail free, ne...

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Present, the chief resident of pediatrics at Golisano Children's Hospital, said he was attracted to the Imagination Library because it goes straight to children's homes and has a demonstrated effect on their later outcomes.

"As a pediatrician, there's only so much you can do within hospital walls," he said. "I wanted something that works, that's scalable and that's more or less turnkey."

Dolly's Imagination Library shows results as a literacy aid, according to research

Parton, the country music superstar, founded the program in 1995 for children in her birthplace of Sevier County, Tennessee. She did it to honor her father, who never learned to read or write.



It expanded nationally in 2000 and now has chapters around the world. As of November, Dolly's library had mailed 193 million free books to more than 2 million children.

There is a [large body of research](#) showing its effectiveness as a literacy intervention. A 2017 study in Syracuse, for example, showed that participating children were 30% more likely to be prepared to learn to read in kindergarten.

Such an intervention would be welcome news in Rochester. Standardized testing in the city school district this fall showed that 90% of kindergarteners

were [already behind grade level](#) in reading.

"There are good supports in a lot of places for kids who are school-age, but for families with young kids, there's really not a lot that's out there," Present said.

Previous coverage: [RCSD gets 'devastating' report on K-8 students. 'We have a lot of work to do'](#)

Three-year-olds recently received "Ten Ways to Hear Snow," a story about the bond between a girl and her grandmother. Four-year-olds got "At the Mountain's Base," inspired by Ola Rexroat, a pioneering female Native American pilot.

The Imagination Library has arrangements with large publishing companies to get low prices on popular books. It costs about \$25 to send books to one child for a full year.

The Rochester chapter currently has funding to enroll at least 1,200 more children, Present said, but his goal is to reach the entire city, or about 13,000 under age 5. People can donate to the program at its website.

Heroes Brewing at 543 Atlantic Ave. has created a beer celebrating the program called Imagination Libations. The release party is at [5:30 p.m. Wednesday at the brewery](#); donations will be collected there as well.



Marlene Rosario Serrano took part in the program a decade ago when she was raising her daughter in New York City. She now lives in northeast Rochester and recently signed up her younger daughter. They read together while getting ready in the morning and then again at bedtime.

"When I saw that, it was just nostalgic, so I was very excited," she said. "She gets to open her own piece of mail, so she loves that. ... It's that excitement of getting a new book. Especially when they can read it by themselves."

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com.