

Newsday

Llife



Books in hand

NONPROFIT BRINGS THE **JOY OF READING** TO CHILDREN **E2**

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LI LIFE NY

Since its founding in 2012 in a Bellmore garage, The Book Fairies' charge has never been more consequential — or challenging. In today's LI Life cover story, read about how the nonprofit spreads the joy of reading to children one book at a time.

In Act 2, Long Island artists share the changes the pandemic has wrought in their creative pursuits.

Meanwhile, today's Faith and Senior calendars continue to offer "virtual" events in which you can engage online.

This issue does not include the regular exploreLI Top 10 and Community Calendar; the Veterans calendar; or the Town Agenda and Police Beat. As we practice social distancing, many events and activities have been canceled.

Remember that every Newsday subscription includes full 24/7 digital access, so you can receive continually updated news and information on your phone, tablet or computer via our website and app, along with the electronic "e-edition" of the paper.



From classic tales to beloved favorites, Long Island librarians chose **100 books** every kid should read before growing up.

See more at newsday.com/family



New Visions School in Freeport set up a drive-through book giveaway in June with books it received from The Book Fairies.

Writing the book



Pamela Antoine Weekes, of Baldwin, and her grandson, J.J. Butler, donate books to The Book Fairies.

Despite pandemic, nonprofit keeps children reading

BY DEIDRE S. GREBEN
Special to Newsday

Drive-throughs and curbside pickups have proved critical in this time of social-distancing — and perhaps none more so than a “Grab ‘n’ Go” staged in June in a Freeport parking lot. Cars lined up, windows were rolled down and young passengers were excited to reach from the backseat to get a different kind of “happy meal” from blue-gloved, mask-wearing attendants outside New Visions, a magnet elementary school.

NEW VISIONS SCHOOL / JESSICA ROMERO

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“The cost of illiteracy is not just on the individual, but on society as a whole.”
 — Eileen Minogue, executive director of The Book Fairies



Amy Zaslansky, founder of Book Fairies, still volunteers every week.

on joy



ON THE COVER. Eileen Minogue, executive director of The Book Fairies, at the warehouse in Freeport where the nonprofit operates.

The giveaway brought joy during the COVID-19 pandemic by serving up good food (bagged breakfasts and lunches for all district students) — and good reads.

“We are feeding their bellies, but we need to feed their brains, too,” said Eileen Minogue, executive director of The Book Fairies, a Long Is-

land-based nonprofit that gets new and gently used books into the hands of children who need them most.

“With libraries closed, as well as schools, we saw and heard a need for our kids to have appropriate, quality books to continue their growth. Remote learning is difficult, and many children needed a change from e-books to ones they could hold,” said Tricia Stasi, a reading specialist with the Freeport school district and a longtime devotee of the book-giving organization.

With the magical help of The Book Fairies, the district distributed about 1,600 books to its kindergarten-through-12th-grade students and is committed to continuing to do so every Thursday throughout the summer at both New Visions and Freeport High School.

Since its founding in 2012 in the Bellmore garage of book enthusiast Amy Zaslansky, The Book Fairies’ charge has never

See COVER STORY on E4



The buzz of packing and sorting fills The Book Fairies’ warehouse in Freeport in the last week of June.

A page-turning mission

COVER STORY from E2

been more consequential — or more challenging. “The COVID-19 pandemic is going to increase the effects of the ‘summer slide’ — the phenomenon when kids’ reading skills slide backward due to lack of access to reading materials. It will go from the normal 10 weeks to an astounding 20 weeks and will widen the educational gap,” Minogue explained, noting the research brief published in April by the nonprofit assessment organization NWEA that explores the potential academic impact of school closures during COVID-19.

STAYING ON THE PAGE

According to Minogue, with scaled-down operations and reduced funding largely due to loss of corporate sponsorship during the pandemic, the organization has still managed to deliver more than 48,000 free paperbacks and hardcovers to teachers, homeless shelters, after-care and foster-care facilities across Long Island and the five boroughs since mid-March. While the number is impressive, it falls far below the 50,000 books volunteer Fairies typically collect and dispense in only a month’s time.

“It’s a hole we are filling,” said Minogue, noting the great need, particularly in underserved communities, that exists across the region. “Without being able to read, people can’t fill out applications, order from menus, or read discharge papers from a hospital. The cost of illiteracy is not just on the individual, but on society as a whole. It’s an investment, and it starts with a book.”

As reported in the “Handbook of Early Literacy Research” (The Guilford Press, 2006), the ratio of books per child is 13 to 1 in middle-income areas, as compared with one age-appropriate book for every 300 children in low-income neighborhoods. “Many of our families are not able to participate in learning due to lack of internet and devices,” said Barbara Leshinger, a literacy coach with the Central Islip school district. “We would love to be able to put real books in the hands of as many students as possible.”



Second-grader Fatima Martinez, left, and her siblings Jonathan and Cristian read books that teacher Grace Ryan got from The Book Fairies.



Teacher Grace Ryan delivered books to her student Sondra Robinson, right, and her brother, Quincey.

Many schools and classrooms lack sufficient funding to support libraries, and book fairs can be expensive for families.

“If one book cost \$5.99 and you have three or four kids, it’s a lot. That’s the price of beef or milk right now,” noted Grace Ryan, a longtime teacher at John S. Hobart Elementary

School (in the William Floyd school district), who has been under the spell of The Book Fairies since seeking to enhance the reading material in her second-grade classroom three years ago.

“I saw that what had been gifted went largely unread and that the kids needed more exciting, up-to-date choices,



Grace Ryan, a longtime teacher at Hobart Elementary School in Shirley, has been making monthly trips to The Book Fairies to collect books for her students.

like the ‘Owl Diaries’ series or ‘Ivy and Bean.’ They love anything by Steve Jenkins and are addicted to ‘Fly Guy.’ I can’t keep them on the shelves,” she said of her new collection, courtesy of The Book Fairies.

According to Zaslansky, the Book Fairies nonprofit puts particular emphasis on amassing books that kids will want

to read. “They are not castoffs, old and yellowed,” she said.

RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

For Ryan, that Sunday trip to the Fairies’ 1,500-square-foot Freeport warehouse quickly became a monthly habit. “As an educator, I am required to pay a nominal \$10 fee to support The Book Fairies, and then I



Book Fairies' program coordinator Sherry McGrath, right, helps Virginia Nunez, a second-grade teacher, load boxes of books for students.

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more," Zaslansky said. A mom of three, Zaslansky worked as an occupational therapist and small-business owner before launching The Book Fairies, having been inspired by the success of a book drive she orchestrated through the PTA. "It's hard to find places that accept books," she explained. "We were inundated."

Soon, so was her garage. "They started creeping into my dining room, the kitchen. My kids were setting the table around piles of books. My husband was done," she recalled of the 33,000 volumes she collected and dispensed the first year. "His family's business had purchased a warehouse that they were planning on renting out, but instead, they generously gave it to us."

Zaslansky, president emeritus of The Book Fairies board of directors, has since handed over the organization's operations to one full-time and one part-time employee. However, she continues to pursue her "happiness" as a volunteer, sorting and packing books in the Freeport repository several times a week.

Like many enterprises, The Book Fairies has had to creatively pivot during the coronavirus era. It has also had to put its wish list — a larger warehouse, more remote drop-off bins and additional staff — on hold. Nonetheless, Minogue views the downtime imposed in recent months as a plus for accumulating inventory. "People have had time to clean out their closets and shelves and don't want to wait to get rid of what they don't need," she said.

MORE INDIVIDUAL DRIVES

Kyle Hunter and his family are among those who recently engaged in some spring cleaning. "I figured many, like us, were doing the same, and I came up with the idea of a contactless book drive at my house," said the rising Herricks High School senior. "I received an overwhelming response and collected more than 75 boxes of books in four short hours."

It was a welcome contribution. The Fairies have had to rely more heavily on drives arranged by individuals recently than by the schools and corporations with which it had customarily partnered.

Bay Shore resident Wendy Wendt transformed what began as a search for a place for her unwanted tomes into a commitment to The Book Fairies orga-

See COVER STORY on E6

BOOK IT!



Aiden Miller, 11, of Merrick, is a volunteer.

- To **donate funds** to support The Book Fairies' mission or to host a book drive, visit thebookfairies.org/ways-to-give-to-the-book-fairies.
- For **volunteer opportunities** and to arrange for book donations, email info@thebookfairies.org.
- To participate in or be a sponsor of the Book Fairies' **August Read-A-Thon** fundraiser, email eileen@thebookfairies.org

— DEIDRE S. GREBEN



Drawings from children decorate the walls at The Book Fairies warehouse.

LINDA ROSIER

LINDA ROSIER

can take all the books I want," she explained of the regularly scheduled take-aways.

Two years ago, the organization also supplied each of the 950 students in her school with two books they could take home and write their names in. "They were laid out on the lunch tables and the kids took turns coming up and choosing.

The Book Fairies provided options for the whole family because we found the students would often ask, 'Do you have any books for my brother? He's 3. Or how about for my 15-year-old cousin?'"

The COVID-19 virus has not deterred Ryan — who also volunteers as a sorter in the Freeport warehouse — from

her mission of fostering a love of reading in her students. During the pandemic, in addition to personally delivering books from The Book Fairies based on the respective reading levels of her students ("in sanitized, reusable shopping bags," she noted), Ryan and her husband greeted each of her second-graders on the day they

were assigned to pick up their belongings from school with a large bag stuffed with chapter, picture and cookbooks as well as popular kids' magazines.

"We want to make sure that the books go out into the communities. We worry that schools can become the logjam. I tell teachers to let the students take the books home. We can get

A community dedicated to literacy



Volunteer Linda Sotomayor says, "The need is more urgent now."

COVER STORY from E4

nization. "I know how important it is to provide children with choice and access to books," said Wendt, who has been furloughed from her job as a field representative for Scholastic Book Fairs. To that end, while following COVID-19 safety guidelines, she has committed to picking up donations, sorting and boxing warehouse inventory, and delivering the books to those in need.

Before the pandemic, The Book Fairies had looked to about 40 local organizations servicing special-needs adults to assist in packing up the books into vans and transporting them to their new owners. The mutually beneficial alliance grew out of a response Zaslansky received to an advertisement she posted in a nearby public library. "The special-needs community has been so proud and excited to be involved," she said.

"They love staying busy and feeling helpful to others," said Julia Rosario, a site supervisor with Plainview-based A-1 Universal Care, of the countless participants in its three-year partnership with the Fairies. "It also provides them with the experience of working before going out and getting a real job." Both entities look forward to resuming their collaboration once the coronavirus pandemic subsides.

The Book Fairies' senior-age volunteers have also had to take a respite from working in the Freeport warehouse, that is, with the exception of Levittown resident Linda Sotomayor.

"The need is more urgent now," said the 73-year-old, who worked for Lufthansa arranging airline flights for missionary and humanitarian groups before retiring and becoming a dedicated volunteer. "Books help kids take themselves out of their current situation."

Still, as noted by Sotomayor, some children on Long Island

have never owned a book before. "I have gone into schools to help with distributing the books and the kids will often offer to return them. But when I say it's theirs to keep, you can't believe the expression on their faces. Everyone remembers the teacher or person who gave them a book."

Fatima Martinez treasures all of the books she and her younger siblings have received this year from her teacher "Ms. Ryan," but particularly enjoys an atlas she received of the United States and Canada. "It's one of my favorites because it gives me a lot to learn and also has stickers," said the 7-year-old.

"What we do can have a huge impact," said Minogue of the 2.3 million books The Book Fairies have distributed since its founding. "Reading does not only provide an escape, but helps kids imagine a future."

Ryan agreed. "The Book Fairies are saving lives," she said, "one book at a time."

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