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'One second of joy.' WKU group gifts books to kids affected by tornadoes

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Jennings Creek Elementary kindergartener Hannah Blevens reads a letter with the bag full of books she was given by the Literacy Ambassadors through donations from Half Price Books and the WKU Bookstore for a December's tornadoes.

photos by Grace Ramey gramey@bgdailynews.com

Over two dozen kids sat expectantly in front of Jennings Creek Elementary's giant Christmas tree Thursday morning, waiting for their first presents of the holiday season – hand-picked books from WKU's Literacy Ambassadors.

As Principal Cody Rich called the students up one by one, they immediately ripped open the gifts and eagerly showed them off to their peers. Some received Avengers-themed adventure books. Others excitedly opened books about outer space. Several kids found Peppa Pig books in their gift bags.

On Thursday, the WKU Literacy Ambassadors gifted books to 35 Jennings Creek Elementary students affected by the December 2021 tornadoes.

In all, they will give out books to 64 kids at T.C. Cherry Elementary, McNeill Elementary, Rockfield Elementary, Bowling Green Junior High School and Bowling Green High School in the first round of distribution, said Dr. Nancy Hulan, associate professor of literacy education at WKU.

“We thought, ‘Well, everybody needs books in the home to help with socio-emotional development.’ “ Hulan said. “A book that has connected with a kid makes such a big difference, and the fact that they get to take that home and have as their own is a big deal.”

The books are paid for by the Rotary Club of Bowling Green, Half-Priced Books and the WKU Bookstore. The WKU Literacy Ambassadors select books for each kid based on their age, grade level and interests.

The Rotary Club focuses on education and literacy with its annual district grants, said Tracey Holland, the Rotary Club's disaster relief chairperson.

"We've kind of gone through this year repairing all the damage, environmentally and structurally, and we can't forget the emotional trauma that this has caused," Holland said. "We can't forget what has happened just because we look around and it doesn't look like tornadoes hit our community."

Books can help kids take their minds off the difficulties of their current situations, or can help them push through adversity, Hulan said.

"They've been through so much, but they can live vicariously through a character and that way it kind of takes the pressure off. So sometimes even when we're in a scary book, it's not so scary because it's somebody else," she said. "They see a character can do something hard and live through a challenge and maybe I can too."

Amber Stewart is a teacher at Jennings Creek Elementary. She teaches Jeremiah, a preschooler who received Backyardigan, Peppa Pig and Grouchy Ladybug books in place of his sister, who attended the elementary school last year when the tornadoes struck.

“It’s really cool just getting to see what happened and then being able to see kids’ faces very excited when they pull each book out,” Stewart said. “Anytime we can get books into the hands of children it’s just one more advantage that they’ll have.”

Angel Ortiz, a 4th grader, was another book recipient. His gift included a Goosebumps book and How to Steal the Mona Lisa, he said. Ortiz said that his home was destroyed after the tornado, although most of his books were saved.

He added that it will be fun to read his new books when he gets bored.

WKU Literacy Ambassador Hope Marcum, a senior elementary education major, said that she saw the posting about the event in one of her classroom buildings and thought it was a great way to get involved with the families affected by the tornadoes, especially considering that she will be involved with younger students in her future career.

“I just wanted to give back as much as I could,” Marcum said. “It’s super important to me to be able to give them this one second of joy, having these memories to separate from those memories from last year.”

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