

Starr Readers book drive expanding reach to a second city

It's taken more than 10 years for word of Starr Readers' annual book donation to the school-children of Rio Grande City to spread to nearby Roma.

Both cities are in Starr County, one of the poorest counties in the nation. Many of its 61,000 residents live in *colonias* with no sewer service and little health care.

About 40 percent of the county's population live below the poverty level, and 95 percent are Latino.

So it might seem odd to be more concerned with delivering a book than food to many households there for Christmas.

But Farmers Branch resident **Karen Furlong**, the founder of Starr Readers, has



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seen the impact it can have when she visits some of the students' homes.

"The parents are so gracious," she said this week, as her book drive shifts into high gear. "They tell me, 'Gracias, gracias, gracias.' They have so little."

She knows that feeding the children's minds can often have a far more lasting effect than feeding their stomachs.

And so she was gratified, but not really surprised, when she got a phone call from the

Roma school district asking for book donations of its own.

For the past 11 years, Furlong has made an annual 10-hour trip from Dallas to Rio Grande City. When she started out, she could fit a collection of donated books in her car.

Today, the corporate flight attendant for NetJets needs an 18-foot van to deliver new books to each student.

She's up to 12,000 books this year, and about 600 of them will go to the first-graders in the Roma school district. She now works closely with First Book, a nonprofit that gives her deep discounts.

The books get delivered to her home about a month before she leaves for the border. At her house, Furlong

sorts them all and gets them ready for each school and grade.

All donations go toward buying the books, and she encourages donors to check out her website — StarrReaders.com — to contribute. She accepts donations year-round.

Furlong, 51, still personally drives all the books down there, with the help of her cousins, like **Travis Rodríguez** of San Antonio, or her friends, like **Marty Merrill** of Dallas.

They drive directly to the Parental Involvement Office, where they are greeted by parents and teachers who help unload the books. From there, the books are distributed to the schools, which, in

turn, distribute them to each student.

Furlong usually goes to each school's library, where she meets many of the students and gives them each a book.

"The kids love to talk about what they're reading, what they want to read, what they want to be when they grow up," Furlong said.

She also has begun collecting donations for two \$3,000 scholarships to help the graduates of Rio Grande City's two high schools go to college.

She hopes to award the first scholarships in 2016. What will the winners of the scholarships have to do?

Write the two best children's books, of course.



Mercedes Olivera

Karen Furlong, who delivers books to Starr County kids every year, says they "love to talk about what they're reading."