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Woman's book drive is a success even in hard times

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Farmers Branch resident **Karen Furlong** was worried the declining economy in Dallas-Fort Worth might play Scrooge with her annual fundraising book drive.

Instead, she may end up with record donations to her Starr Readers project that will allow her to deliver \$5,000 worth of books just in time for the Feast of the Magi on Jan. 6, a traditional day for gift-giving in Mexico.

"Donations were wonderful this year," she said. "The economy tanks and people are more generous. Go figure."

Ms. Furlong, a flight attendant for a private corporate jet company, relishes her role as Santa to nine libraries in Rio Grande City public schools. The Texas border town sits in Starr County – one of the poorest in the country, where children often live without health care or sewer service.

For many of the town's families who live in *colonias*, buying a book may well take a back seat to buying groceries. This year, they may be reeling even more from the recession's punch.

And yet, give a child a book and you can change a life forever. Educators say it's crucial to a child's success that he or she knows how to read by third grade.

Ms. Furlong, who often buys a book a week, sent letters asking for donations to all her co-workers, both former and current, and got her neighborhood Chase Bank to display a sign in the lobby asking for donations.

She will keep taking donations (checks, made out to Starr Readers, can be mailed to 3125 Damascus Way, Dallas, Texas, 75234) until Jan. 4, the day before she heads down to the border for the fourth year in a row to deliver the books herself. She works with [Barnes & Noble](#), which discounts the books.

Besides classics and popular books such as *Little Women* and *Stuart Little*, this year Ms. Furlong also will buy new, culturally diverse tales, such as *Frida* by Jonah Winter and *Elena's Serenade* by Campbell Geeslin. The former tells the story of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo as a child, and the latter follows a little girl's quest to be a glassblower, like the famous ones in Monterrey.

"These books can stir a child's imagination and sense of hope, and these kids really need it," Ms. Furlong said. "Their lot in life may not be what their parents had hoped for."

Ms. Furlong's mom, Evangeline Rodriguez Marino, will drive down with her once again to the border to deliver the books. The trip has become an enjoyable mother-daughter tradition that she looks forward to.

It also has produced bright moments of hope that reinforce her commitment.

"We drove them down last year in a medium car and books were everywhere," she recalled. "In the trunk, back seat was full to the top, floorboards, on mom's lap, and under her feet – it was hysterical."

Some books fell out at one stop to buy gas, and a stranger asked about all the books. After being told what the purpose was, "he pulled out a \$20 and donated on the spot – incredible!"