

Books bring new worlds to border



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Driving from Dallas County to Starr County on the U.S.-Mexico border in one day can't be anyone's idea of a great way to spend your birthday.

Unless you're Karen Furlong, and you happen to be taking a Christmas present to thousands of schoolchildren in one of the poorest counties in the country.

The present? A book.

"It's a great birthday gift to myself, actually," Furlong said. "The gratitude alone will bring you to your knees."

It's been a mission, not a vacation, for the 54-year-old founder of Starr Readers since she started the book campaign in 2004.

It has mushroomed into a formal nonprofit organization that today gets donations of money and new books from individuals, several foundations and organizations throughout the year. Every donation goes toward buying books. None is spent on overhead or personnel.

This year, in addition to steep discounts from First Book, she also got donations from Disney and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. One anonymous donor sends her \$200 in cash every year now and signs it from "Ronald Reagan."

And a local author, Jan Daniel, donated 550 copies of her children's book, *Susie Snowflake*. Those went to the first-graders in the Roma school district.

That's about as many books as Furlong started out donating 12 years ago, when she first



Adelina Villarreal

Children look over the selection of donated books at Roque Guerra, Jr. Elementary School in Starr County, on the border with Mexico. They each got to pick one to keep, thanks to an annual book drive by North Texas resident Karen Furlong.

approached the Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District about making donations to the elementary schools' libraries.

This year, she ended up delivering about 15,000 books, with a retail cost of more than \$100,000, to the school district. She made the delivery last week, just as schools were about to close for the holidays. Each student in the district's nine elementary, three middle and two high schools got one new book to keep.

"The children were so excited and thankful," said Adelina Villarreal, library director for the school district.

"It was a beacon of light for the children, that someone would think about them."

Among the assortment of books the children got this year were *Sold*, a story about child slavery in Nepal; *The Day the Crayons Quit* and *The Day the Crayons Came Home*;

and *Disney's Christmas Story Collection*, with characters from *Toy Story*.

These are stories many of the children would probably never read because they live in *colonias*, unincorporated areas of the county that have no sewer service. Many of the parents work in the nation's agricultural fields, and some of their children end up working there in summers, too.

It's one of the reasons Furlong is adding a new element to her campaign and hopes donors keep donating on her website, StarrReaders.com. They can also send donations by check to Starr Readers, 3125 Damascus Way, Dallas, TX 75234.

"Adelina and I are going to go in the fields where the children are working, and we're going to have a story time," she said. She hopes to have a bookmobile.

She's also planning to do-

nate books to start free tiny libraries — one next to a county government building, and another in the middle of a *colonia*.

She knows that the simple act of reading a good book can open up a new world for a child. She's convinced it's one way to prevent some of these kids, who are at risk of thinking they have no future, from joining drug cartels.

"They want kids uneducated, without an imagination," she said of the drug gangs. "They don't want people who have goals, so they try to get them when they're young."

She knows she can't do anything about their financial situation and the need for many of them to join their parents in the fields.

"But we can do this, and let them leave the field with a book."

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