

Once Upon a Time...



First Chapter Begins For Local Reading Oasis Projects

Every gift has a story behind it. Ironically... this gift is all about stories.

The first Reading Oasis in South Dakota was unveiled recently at the Boys & Girls Club of Watertown. The donor for the local project is Watertown couple, Doug and Lynn Sharp, along with Toyota.

When the Sharps established a fund at the Watertown Community Foundation, they did so with reading as one of their focuses. The Reading Oasis, which is joint project of Watertown Kiwanis Club and Scholastic Book Fairs, fit right into that passion.

"The reasons my wife and I embraced this program are many," Sharp explained. Both of our mothers gave us the gift of reading with all the books that were available in our homes." And it didn't stop there.



2nd grader Ami Dobinski

"My wife's mother, Lorraine Case, was a librarian for many years in Watertown. She was the "story lady" at the library during the summers. She kept kids entertained over the years with her costumes and story books."

Both families were brought up reading so it was natural for Lynn to start reading to their own children when they were babies. They knew that children who are read to at an early age do better in school than children who don't have access to books or parents who read to them. The Reading Oasis, Sharp said, is an opportunity to bring the

world of stories to kids, some of whom may not have the chance to find books elsewhere. "Kids can live in another world for a while in books. Hopefully, it will engender in the participants a love of reading that will continue on as they get older"...much like it did for us.

As for the kids participating thus far, they seem to be on the same page.

I think it's awesome," said 9-year-old Linnea Allbee. "There are tons of new books to read. You can get lost in your book and fall into a world with the characters."

"There is such a variety of books," added 11-year-old Anna Woods. "Before, we didn't have a lot of comfy places to sit and read."

Liz Christianson, executive director of the Boys & Girls Club, said the Reading Oasis is already getting a lot of use. "It's just a step forward in literacy, bringing families, schools and the community together to support literacy development for children," she added. She said the advantage of launching the Reading Oasis shortly before summer vacation is to lessen the impact of reading loss between school years.

The Reading Oasis features bright colors, soft bean bag chairs, a listening center with audio books and approximately 1,200 books ranging from picture books to the sixth-grade reading level. One of the great things about this story is that it really has no ending. Over time, the books will be gradually given away to youths and replenished.



4th-grader Troy Randall (left) and third-grader Austin Ninneman

Not only that, but work is already under way for the next Reading Oasis in Watertown at Watertown Christian School, thanks again to the Sharps and their fund. According to Watertown Kiwanian, Al Vanderlaan, Lt. Gov. Region 5, they plan to have it up and running by the time school begins again in the fall.

Vanderlaan brought the Reading Oasis idea to Watertown last fall with Stephanie Davern of Scholastic, the organization that has been working with Kiwanis Clubs across the nation to build Reading Oasis sites.

The ease and speed of setting up the Reading Oasis in Watertown, is due to the Sharps' generosity, Vanderlaan said. Even Scholastic was impressed and this is the first Oasis set up through the funding of a private donor. "It is really remarkable how much they care for children and for reading."

The Sharps are excited about the program growing and the bottom line: More books reaching more kids. They, along with Kiwanis and Scholastic believe The Reading Oasis story in Watertown has just begun.



Donors Doug and Lynn (at right) Sharp cut the ribbon at the Scholastic Reading Oasis in the Boys & Girls Club of Watertown. This is the first Reading Oasis in South Dakota.

