

Books are students' best friends

Reading Oasis sites give kids an opportunity to learn, grow



40 Stories, 40 years – All about books

In commemoration of the Watertown Area Community Foundation's 40th anniversary, as well as March 2 World Book Day, the Foundation shares some stories all about books as its sixth installment in "40 Stories for 40 Years."

Over those years, the Foundation has awarded more than \$25,000 to the Watertown Regional Library. Those grants have supported children's programming, exhibits and speakers, as well as help with promoting the annual used book sale.

It's all a part of 40 years of "Looking Forward and Giving Back."

Editor's note: The following is an updated version of a story previously published in 2015 when the Reading Oasis effort began in Watertown.

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

The first Reading Oasis in South Dakota was unveiled in 2015 at the Boys & Girls Club of Watertown. There are now six Reading Oasis sites in our community thanks to Watertown couple Doug and Lynn Sharp, along with Toyota.

When the Sharps established a fund at the Watertown Area Community Foundation, they did so with reading as one of

their focuses. The Reading Oasis, which is a 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 said. 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.

"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.” (There is also a fund at the Foundation in memory of Case. The B. Lorraine Case “Once Upon a Time” Fund supports educational children’s programming at the Watertown Regional Library.)

Both families were brought up reading, so it was natural for Lynn to start reading to their own children when they were babies. The Sharps 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.”

Liz Christianson, executive director of the Boys & Girls Club, said the Reading Oasis is used every day.

“It’s just a step forward in literacy, bringing families, schools and the community together to support literacy development for children,” she added.

In addition to the Club’s Reading Oasis, there are also Reading Oasis sites at Watertown Christian School, Immaculate Conception School, St. Martin’s Lutheran School, Roosevelt and McKinley Elementary schools.

Each Reading Oasis typically 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.

“We want to get books into the hands of children,” said Nancy Linneman, Watertown Kiwanis member. And, just as important, if a child finds a book he or she loves, we want him or her to keep that book. Linneman and other Kiwanians also get involved with reading regularly to children at some of the sites.

Part of the Reading Oasis program includes replenishing books whether they have been well-loved or given to children over time ... another facet of the effort that the Sharps support whole-heartedly.

That, alone, means the Reading Oasis story in Watertown is happily ... a never-ending one.