



## IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY

### 2023 EDUCATION FINALIST: DOLLY PARTON'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY

#### INITIATIVE: BOOKS FROM BIRTH: BUILDING A SYSTEM FOR EARLY LITERACY

#### OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVE – IN THE APPLICANT'S WORDS

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and Sunrise Rotary's Born to Read are working with Munson Medical Center to increase kindergarten readiness across the Grand Traverse Region.

Just 44% of local children start kindergarten with the literacy skills needed to succeed.

Research shows the first 3-years of life are critical for brain development. Nurturing interactions, having books in the home, and reading to babies lay the foundation for learning long before children enter school.

We are building a system to educate and invite new parents to enroll their newborn in the Imagination Library before leaving Munson hospital.

The earlier a child enrolls, the greater the effect on school readiness.

Every month children will receive an age-appropriate book until age 5, at no cost to families.

With Impact 100's support, we can transform children's lives by inspiring a love of reading and delivering books to children across the 5-county region, starting at birth.

*The following sections contain certain key information from the application, as written by the applicant.*

*While detailed financial information has not been provided here due to its confidential nature, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough financial review by our Financial Review Committee (FRC) and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our standards for moving forward.*

#### ORGANIZATION'S VISION STATEMENT

A region where all young children are inspired to read, learn to love books and gain the foundational literacy skills they need to start kindergarten and experience continuing school success.

## **ORGANIZATION'S MISSION STATEMENT**

To promote emergent literacy and foster a love of reading by getting books into the homes and hands of young children in the Grand Traverse Region, at no cost to families.

## **DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY**

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) is an award-winning book gifting program that supports children's literacy development from birth to age five. Our aim is to inspire a love of reading and to improve scholastic performance by providing books to young children, at no cost to their families. The program works by mailing a book directly to a child's home every month from the time a child is registered until they 'graduate' on their 5th birthday. Since 1995, the Imagination Library has gifted over 204 million books to children across the U.S. and abroad. DPIL has been recognized on many occasions for its positive impact on early literacy including awards from the Library of Congress and the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

Launched in 2016, our local organization, DPIL GTR is an affiliate that reaches children within the Grand Traverse Region. Our mission is to promote early literacy and foster an appreciation of reading, by ensuring that young children in our community benefit from a home library of high quality, age-appropriate books. DPIL is an inclusive program; children under five living in the covered geographic area are eligible irrespective of family background and income. DPIL GTR currently registers eligible children in Grand Traverse, Leelanau, and Kalkaska Counties while our partner affiliate, DPIL Benzie, registers children in Benzie County.

There is a division of responsibilities between the national Dollywood Foundation and its local affiliates (such as DPIL GTR). The Foundation procures and mails books each month, making the cost-effective delivery of high-quality books possible. An expert panel of early childhood professionals chooses the books, ensuring that they are age appropriate and aligned with a child's developmental needs. Each selection is accompanied by guidance for parents as they read the story to their child, encouraging daily reading and early skill development.

As a regional affiliate, DPIL GTR is responsible for registering eligible children in the Grand Traverse Region as well as for raising the money to pay for the books these children receive. The annual cost to buy and mail monthly books is \$26.40 per child (\$2.20 per book). Our program is funded by grants and donations, and run entirely by a dedicated team of volunteers. All monies raised by our nonprofit organization, a 501 (c)(3), go directly to buying books for local children.

Since we started in 2016, DPIL GTR has funded the mailing of monthly books to over 3,450 local children and families (now more than 26,000 books annually). We have expanded program availability from a single Interlochen zip code to all of Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties. Enrollment is growing rapidly. Between December 2020 and December 2022, the number of registered children across the three-county area grew by 130%. That trend has continued into 2023 as more young families learn about the program.

We are applying for funds from IMPACT 100 to take this progress to the next level. Our goal is to ensure that every child living in the 5-county region is eligible to receive monthly books from Dolly

Parton’s Imagination Library starting at birth until their fifth birthday. To achieve this transformative goal, we are partnering with our sister affiliate DPIL Benzie, our primary collaborator Born to Read, which is a signature project of the Rotary Club of Traverse Bay Sunrise, as well as Munson Healthcare, and the Traverse Area District Library (TADL).

The above referenced Born to Read was launched in 2011 in partnership with Munson, the Great Start Collaborative and TADL to promote early literacy right from birth. Through Born to Read, parents of every newborn at Munson receive a packet with a book for the baby, literacy tips, a coupon for another book at Traverse Area District Library, and community resource information. Each year, the Sunrise Rotary Club purchases books, collects printed materials, and assembles 1500 packets which Munson Medical Center distributes at the time of the baby’s birth.

Working together, we will build on this system to include on-site registration for DPIL at the time of birth at Munson and to expand DPIL GTR geographic eligibility to include Antrim County. We will also conduct an annual 'Books from Birth' campaign, developed and led by Born to Read, to increase public awareness of the program and to raise funds needed for sustainability.

Funds from IMPACT 100 will allow us to build this transformative system, expanding the geographic scope to include all five counties and doubling the number of children currently receiving monthly DPIL books from 2,573 (including Benzie) to 4,969 by the end of 2024.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF INITIATIVE**

If you can read, you can do anything, dream anything and be anything. -Dolly Parton

Our community’s children face tremendous literacy challenges. Fewer than half start kindergarten ready to learn. A child not reading at grade level by the end of first grade has only a 12% probability of reading at grade level by the end of 3rd grade. In our region, just 48% of third graders are ‘proficient’ readers. The need for change is urgent. Children who aren’t competent readers by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school and are at greater risk for substance abuse, violence, and incarceration.

Changing this disheartening trajectory is possible. Research documents three essential ingredients for raising readers:

1. Start early during infancy when brain development occurs more rapidly than at any other time;
2. Fill homes with books supporting language acquisition and learning;
3. Educate parents about the importance of reading aloud with young children, which is the single most critical factor influencing school success.

The Books from Birth initiative is based on this research and builds on the strengths of two programs with the shared mission of promoting early literacy. Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (DPIL) and Born to Read of the Rotary Club of Traverse Bay Sunrise are working together to transform a piecemeal approach into a system that ensures all three ingredients are available to every child under five in the 5-county region.

The Imagination Library is an award-winning, national book gifting program that supports literacy development from birth to age 5, by mailing books monthly to children at no cost to their families. DPIL's impact on reading to children and school readiness are well documented. In the Grand Traverse region, affiliate organizations DPIL GTR and DPIL Benzie register local children and raise funds needed to pay for books and postage.

The Born to Read program reaches families when a child is born, providing a "Welcome Baby" packet to parents of all newborns delivered at Munson Medical Center. It contains a book for babies, literacy tips, a book coupon redeemable at the Traverse Area District Library (TADL) and community resource information. Rotarians have reached approximately 1,500 parents annually since 2011.

Working collaboratively, DPIL GTR and Born to Read are building a systematic approach for increasing early literacy, starting at birth and continuing until a child's 5th birthday. This initiative improves on what we are doing in two fundamental ways. Geographic coverage will expand to include Antrim County. Every child under 5 in the Grand Traverse region will now be eligible for the Imagination Library program. We anticipate a substantial enrollment increase across the 5-counties as more families learn about it. There will also be a concerted effort to enroll children at birth. Munson staff will meet with parents of newborns inviting them to register their child in the DPIL program. The earlier a child starts the greater the program's impact on learning.

New in this initiative is the integration of Born to Read baby packets with an invitation to enroll in the DPIL program, both occurring while a baby is at Munson Medical Center and available to all newborns from the 5-counties. We anticipate this direct and seamless process with Munson's endorsement will dramatically increase newborn enrollment.

A team of volunteers from DPIL GTR and Born to Read will lead the initiative, supported by Munson and TADL staff. The initiative will be sustained through an annual Books from Birth campaign to raise awareness and funding for Imagination Library 'gift scholarships', donations made to DPIL that cover, to age 5, the cost of books and postage for newly enrolled children. If awarded, all Impact 100 funds will be allocated to DPIL for purchasing books.

By December 2024, we expect DPIL enrollment to double; at least 60% of children in the region will be receiving monthly books, many starting at birth. They will have home libraries with age-appropriate books, their parents will read to them more often, and they will experience the joys of reading that will help them to flourish when they start school.

Impact 100 will help launch a transformative system to increase kindergarten readiness, giving our community's children a strong foundation for school success.

## **COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED**

This initiative will be open to all children in Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties from birth until their fifth birthday, irrespective of family background or circumstance. According to the most recent census data, there are 8,173 children under age 5 in the five-county area. Currently, 31% (2,573) of these children are enrolled in the Imagination Library and receiving monthly books. Our goal is to increase that number to 61% (4,969) by the end of 2024.

This will be accomplished, in part, by increasing our geographic scope. Young children who live in Antrim County do not currently have access to the Imagination Library. We do not open a geographic area until we have the funding capacity to support the registration of children in that locale. To date, we have not had sufficient funds to be confident of meeting that geographic obligation. With the opening of Antrim, all children in the 5-county region will be eligible.

In the Grand Traverse region, there are many parents who struggle with economic pressures that impact their children's literacy and learning. The proportion of ALICE (asset limited, income constrained, employed) households in local counties is high: 36% in Antrim, 39% in Benzie, 33% in Grand Traverse, 40% in Kalkaska and 42% in Leelanau. Although low literacy levels are present across all economic groups, children from low-income families face greater challenges. By 18 months of age, children from diverse socio-economic groups already display dramatic vocabulary differences. The gap continues to widen as children start kindergarten, struggle with reading and fall further behind.

Many young families may not have the resources to buy many books, and access to print materials can be a challenge in rural communities. The Imagination Library overcomes such constraints by delivering books directly to a child's home, at no cost to the family. DPIL volunteers reach out to register these children at food and baby pantries, daycares, libraries, laundromats, WIC offices and area elementary schools serving a high proportion of low-income families.

This initiative will also extend eligibility to all newborns at Munson Medical Center from the 5-county region, where over 37% of births are Medicaid paid. Enrolling a child at birth maximizes the impact of DPIL participation. It is essential to a child's development that parents start reading, talking and singing to their child from birth. The quantity of reading and oral language a child experiences from ages 0-3 impacts their academic success well into elementary school.

The Imagination Library's monthly books are a wonderful source for stimulating parent-child interactions and reminding parents to read with their babies. Research shows the longer children are enrolled the more often parents read to them; daily reading doubled from 29% to 59% in one study! Children who participate for longer periods of time are also more likely to develop the kindergarten readiness skills they need.

This initiative allows us to reach more children, and reach them at birth, the most critical time to impact their learning and development.

### **NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED AND GAPS IN EXISTING SERVICES**

In the Grand Traverse Region less than half (44%) of our young children start kindergarten ready to learn. The other half begin school at a tremendous disadvantage. These early literacy deficits persist; just 48% of our region's third graders are 'proficient' readers. People, in general, do not recognize the impact of early literacy on overall scholastic performance. As a result, many of our children are being left behind.

The implications are sobering. Children who are not competent readers by third grade are much more likely to drop out of high school. Studies have revealed strong associations between low literacy levels and a range of high-risk behaviors in adolescence. According to the National Research Council, many of

the academic struggles faced by today's adolescents are the result of reading problems that could have been avoided or resolved in early childhood.

Altering the disheartening trajectory faced by so many of our community's children is possible. The solutions are not complicated. Research demonstrates a simple recipe with three critical ingredients for raising readers: 1. start early; 2. get books in the home; and, 3. read, sing, and talk with your child, right from the start.

First, start early. Early childhood, especially infancy, offers a critical window for stimulating learning with rapid brain development that doesn't occur at any other time. Babies are born ready to learn. Their brains develop connections faster in the first five years than at any other time in their lives. Experiences and loving relationships stimulate children's development, creating millions of connections in their brains, and their brains develop with repetitive, consistent and familiar everyday routines and practices with loving caregivers.

Books are the second essential ingredient. Studies show that raising a child in a home filled with books positively impacts future academic growth and has a large effect on literacy in later life. The more books the better. Exposing children to books and stories early in life supports language acquisition which, according to the CDC, is a primary factor in determining both school readiness and long-term academic success. Books are tools for sharing stories, ideas, and values. Daily routines with books can help build strong, positive relationships between a parent and child.

This leads to the third ingredient. Reading aloud, talking, and singing with babies and young children stimulate language development long before a child can talk. Preparation for learning starts at birth. Research shows that being read to before starting school is the single most important factor influencing a child's early educational success. Young children who are read to regularly have greater language comprehension, larger vocabularies and higher cognitive skills than their peers. A child who is read just one book a day starts school with a vocabulary approaching 300,000 words while a child who is never read to learns just 4,660.

Fewer than half of the parents in our region have daily habits of reading, talking, and singing with their young children. Only 15% read with their infants and toddlers.

Two critical gaps need to be filled to take full advantage of the Imagination Library's potential to enhance children's literacy in our region.

Right now, young children who live in Antrim County, where over one-third of households are living below the ALICE threshold, do not have access to the Imagination Library program. The children of Antrim County deserve equal access. Our aim is to fill this geographic gap and build a strong foundation of literacy support for young families across the 5-county region.

Second, although Born to Read starts at birth, the earliest time in life possible, reaching parents of every baby born at Munson with a book and literacy information, it is a one-time connection. The Imagination Library has monthly contact with a child, but that contact may not start right away because some families are unaware of the program and don't register their child until much later. Later enrollment reduces the number of books a child receives. By working together, our two organizations will reach more children, reach them earlier, and with greater impact.

We propose a transformative system that expands the availability of the Imagination Library program across the region, coupled with a highly effective method to register newborns at Munson. This creates a powerful, research-based, and cost-effective way to give our community's children the very best opportunity to become proficient readers, increasing their chances for success in school and in life.

#### **SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE**

When a child is registered in DPIL GTR we make a promise to that child that they will receive one book per month until their 5th birthday. We have always fulfilled this promise, even as the annual cost to reach registered children has risen from \$605 when we started, to \$57,300 today. We plan far enough ahead to assure that our promise will be kept; the Impact 100 Grant, combined with our own efforts described below, will assure it need never be withdrawn.

The system being built by this initiative will be sustained through credibility established by our collaboration with Rotary Club of Traverse Bay Sunrise - Born to Read and existing partnerships with Munson and TADL. We are working with Rotary Sunrise to conduct our first annual "Books from Birth – A Community Gift for Raising Readers" campaign to support DPIL 'gift scholarships' for all children born at Munson from the 5-county region. The campaign goal in this transitional year is \$115,900 but will reach \$225,000 thereafter, based on 1500 Munson births.

We are also anticipating rising enrollment of children ages 1+ resulting from campaign media exposure and the opening of Antrim County. DPIL GTR will continue to raise funds to support these children through grants, individual donations, community events and the early childhood millage. Our organization has demonstrated a history of financial sustainability exemplified by full funding of the program as the number of registered children in Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties has increased from 24 to 2,169.