



2018 MIDWEST RLF CHARITY PROJECT – ONE FOR THE BOOKS

During RLF's 25 years of existence, many of the 5,000-plus graduates of the program have found great enjoyment and fulfillment in undertaking a meaningful group project to benefit others sometime during the 9-month program. But when the participants in this year's Midwest RLF program set out with the goal of gathering 1,500 books to deliver to a local Chicago non-profit, they never dreamed they would eventually collect a whopping 11,533 books.

"Research shows that more than 60% of low-income families have no books at all in their homes for their children," says Christine Provost, one of the two project leaders for the 2018 Midwest RLF charitable endeavor. "And 80% of preschool and after-school programs serving low-income populations have no age-appropriate books for their children."

When presented with statistics like these, the 52 participants in the 2018 Midwest RLF quickly voted to undertake a collection of books for children. "We decided to collect books for Bernie's Book Bank, a not-for-profit organization in Lake Bluff, IL that collects, sorts, and distributes new or gently-used, age-appropriate books to children ages 0 to 12," says Sachin Master, the other 2018 Midwest RLF project leader.

Since 2009, Bernie's has distributed approximately 12.7 million books to at-risk children. The non-profit is Chicago's largest provider of quality children's books; sometimes growing a child's personal library to almost 150 books. Bernie's works in partnership with schools, libraries, medical offices and WIC partners – plus other groups like the Midwest RLF – to collect and distribute books as a vehicle for children on their journey to a better life.



After deciding to collect books for Bernie's, the Midwest RLF participants and three facilitators formed five teams "to make it an even more fun challenge," says Master. The results were remarkable.

All five teams collected at least 1,000 books apiece. The RLF participants organized company book drives, book drives via Facebook and even a book drive among a doctor's office group. And one single RLF participant, Cathy Haynes, amassed 2,754 books herself – nearly one-fourth of all books collected.

When the five-week collection period ended, the Midwest RLF participants realized they had accumulated 11,533 books. They then loaded them on a bus and delivered them to Bernie's. There, they unloaded the thousands of books into staging bins to be processed and then spent several hours sorting them to ensure they were age-appropriate and met Bernie's quality standards.



“It was such a meaningful outing and experience,” says Provost. “We’re still astounded at how many books our group collected when our goal was just 1,500.”

And calculating that each child would receive an average of six or seven books apiece, Provost figures that “our RLF group was able to help approximately 1,800 children with our book collection.”

Truly a charitable endeavor that's one for the books – for the 2018 Midwest RLF and for all those children on the receiving end of this successful project.

