

A reading oasis

Library and Sarasota Housing Authority seek to end 'book deserts'

By Tim Fanning

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SARASOTA — The Sarasota Housing Authority is teaming up with Sarasota County Libraries to make "book deserts" a thing of the past.

With the launching of the national Book-Rich Environment campaign this month, the two organizations will distribute 2,500 free books over the summer to children who live in the public housing communities on Orange Avenue, where many of the families live in extreme poverty.

"Instead of it being a book desert, where these families don't have children's books in their homes at all, we are literally trying to make it a book-rich environment in not only their homes but their neighbors' homes and in the children's library in the building," said William Russell, President and CEO of Sarasota Housing Authority.

After the first book giveaway on June 9 at The Sarasota Housing Authority on 1912 N. Orange Avenue, families had the opportunity to register for library cards, sign up for summer reading programs and were even offered free family portraits.

"These kids are going to get some new, high-quality children's books to read. Having books in the home is a really critical resource. Even if they can't read, these are books their parents or older siblings can read to them. For the kids who can read, they can develop a love for reading that can last a lifetime," said Russell.

Russell said it is especially crucial to reach children before the fourth grade, when students are no longer instructed how to read.

This story comes from SPIRE CoLab, a partnership between philanthropy and journalism meant to inspire communities to take action on relevant social issues. It is led by the Herald-Tribune and funded by The Patterson Foundation. Find more stories and information at spirecolab.com.

"They teach kids to read up until third grade, and then from then on kids read to learn.

For many children, they have the ability to do math homework, but they can't read the problem. They don't literally drop out in fourth grade, but they seem to physically check out," said Russell.

Three hundred children and their families live in the public housing communities on Orange Avenue, where the median income is \$24,300, well below the median income in the surrounding area of \$61,900.

Russell was recently part of a delegation from Sarasota and Manatee Counties that attended a national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading conference in Denver, Colorado, where this region won an All-America City award for the efforts of the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

While the Sarasota Housing Authority's primary focus is managing and maintaining housing units, Russell believes that the organization can have a key role to play in helping children grow up in low-income housing by giving them opportunities to succeed and learn, so that the children can then have numerous life opportunities that will break the cycle of poverty.

The two remaining Book-Rich Environment events will take place on July 13 and Aug. 9.



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[COURTESY PHOTO]



Children enjoy free books they received during a recent Book-Rich Environment event sponsored by the Sarasota Housing Authority and Sarasota County Public Libraries. [COURTESY PHOTO / SARASOTA HOUSING AUTHORITY]