



Community Profile: Virginia Children's Book Festival



Before the dust settles from the vice presidential debate, Longwood University will host another important event, the 2016 Virginia Children's Book Festival (VCBF).

Each fall, thousands of children converge on the campus of Longwood University in Farmville. Held this year on Oct. 13-15, the unique festival provides the opportunity to meet famous children's book authors and illustrators, participate in interactive programs and learn more about reading, writing and the enjoyment of books.

"What started as an idea a few years ago has grown into the largest children's book festival in America," according to VCBF Executive Director Juanita Giles. The creator of the festival, and a Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC) member, Giles says she noticed that many of the opportunities she had when growing up in this area are no longer available. "Reading groups, art classes, mobile libraries and other opportunities no longer exist or are very limited. I noticed this in the school systems and communities throughout Southside Virginia." This deficiency spurred Giles to plan and implement the first Virginia Children's Book Festival.

In 2014, after hunting for a suitable location, Giles approached Longwood University which agreed to host the event. "We had to scramble a little to pull the first year together," states Giles. "We got it off the ground and hosted 15 authors and illustrators and roughly 1,000 kids, which was fantastic." However, Giles wasn't satisfied, as she knew the children who needed to be reached were the toughest to get. "The demographics and transportation limitations in our area make reaching these children difficult. We

knew we needed to work with the schools and increase the number of teachers and students in attendance,” she explains.

Giles shares that her vision is for this festival to become a vehicle to reach children who don't own books or go to the library. “Books can help children find themselves and realize they are part of something bigger, that they can make an impact. Everyone can find a character to relate to, no matter their background or what they are going through in life. Reading a book can have a huge impact on a child's life,” explains Giles. “One book, the right book, can change a point of view or attitude. That's a powerful thing.”



These are just a few of the books collected and distributed throughout the year by the VCBF volunteers.

Each year, Giles and her team of volunteers work hard to bring the best lineup of authors to the festival. “There is something for every kid,” shares Giles. “We want to have powerful authors and recognizable characters with whom children can connect.” The festival has been fortunate to host some of the top children's book authors in the country, with an impressive list of award winners and New York Times bestsellers since its first year.



2015 Newbery award-winner Kwame Alexander addresses a group of students during a poetry session.

This list of authors continues to grow and become even more prestigious. “When we started, there were certain authors who were out of our range. Now some of those same authors are contacting us — requesting to participate in the festival,” says Giles.

The list of authors for 2016 looks to be the best lineup yet, featuring 24 prominent writers and illustrators. “We have an amazing list for 2016,” shares Giles, “including the Newbery Medal Winner,



New York Times bestselling author Todd Parr interacts with local elementary students during one of the festival's workshops.

Matt de la Peña." The Newbery Medal is given each year to the author of the top contribution to American literature for children. Additionally, many other nationally recognized authors and illustrators round out the impressive lineup.

Children attending the festival will engage with authors and illustrators during interactive workshops and sessions, featuring reading, writing and illustration topics. The authors will have their books available for purchase, and those in attendance will have the

opportunity to get them signed. In addition, Richmond-based bookstore Chop Suey will be on hand with a large selection of books for sale.

The impact of the festival is beginning to grow into what Giles had hoped for. "I was not satisfied after the first year. I wanted to continue to reach more children," shares Giles. Little did Giles know, she had started an event that would gain national recognition and evolve into hosting an expected crowd of up to 10,000 children in 2016, including more than 50 schools from across Virginia.

"We would not be able to put on this festival without the support we receive from Longwood University," says Assistant VCBF Director Mary Jo Stockton. Stockton, who also works at Longwood, serves as the liaison between the festival and the university. The 2016 festival has expanded to three days this year and, with the help of Longwood, the organizers hope Saturday will draw families and groups from all over the state. "Thursday and Friday are the field-trip days, when school groups come. We wanted to make Saturday have more of a festival feel," says Stockton. While all three days are open to the public, Saturday will feature more open, drop-in type sessions. "It is beneficial for Longwood to have these students and



Author-illustrators Ben Hatke and Cece Bell share tips with local students during an illustration workshop.



Festival Director Juanita Giles (left) and Director of Development Nicole Perkins are shown in front of Longwood University's Ruffner Hall, a building that will host several activities during the festival.

families on campus; it's great exposure for the university," explains Stockton.

The mission of putting books in the hands and homes of children isn't just accomplished at the festival. "We wanted to do more, to have the ability to offer more books," shares Nicole Perkins, director of development for the VCBF. "We started doing book drives and collecting used books throughout the year." These book drives, hosted by local businesses, including SEC, help continue the festival's mission throughout the year. "Thousands of children's books are collected and sorted,"

explains Perkins. These books are distributed at local Christmas parades, to juvenile detention centers and other local organizations where they can get into the hands of children who may not otherwise have access to books.

The Virginia Children's Book Festival and the accompanying book drives are entirely organized and put on by volunteers. "We rely on our volunteers and the community, along with organizations like Southside Electric Cooperative, for sponsorships and donations," explains Giles. "These events absolutely must remain free. We cannot have fees or charges creating a barrier that keeps us from reaching children in this area." Giles and her team welcome new sponsors, donations and volunteers to help make these events successful.

"We have been asked to move the festival to other locations that want to host the event," says Giles, "but this is where it needs to be, where the children need it the most. We cannot wait to see the festival continue to grow and expand each year."

SEC is proud to be a sponsor of the 2016 Virginia Children's Book Festival, which comes to Longwood University in Farmville on Oct. 13-15. For more information, please visit www.vachildrensbookfestival.com.

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