

FRI SAT SUN

Sept. 12, 2008 to Sept. 14, 2008

AURORA Sentinel



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Mike Nelson's weather Page 2

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WEEKEND

100 YEARS OF NEWS: 1908 - 2008



SENTINEL LIFE

A new Aurora Public Schools program is providing students who have been expelled with a chance to continue their education. **PAGE 4**

SPORTS

BRONCOS VS. CHARGERS

2:15 p.m. Sunday in Denver

A true test awaits in Broncos' AFC West rival. **PAGE 11**



YOUR WEEKEND

The Coens come back to comedy

BRAD PITT, George Clooney reteam for "Burn After Reading." **PAGE 8**



Reuben Passarelli, kindergartner at Iowa Elementary School, looks at books donated by the Alyssa Cares Foundation Sept. 9. The foundation was formed in March roughly a year after the family lost their daughter to leukemia. Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel

ALYSSA'S GIFT

A family that lost its daughter to leukemia helps make best of the tragedy via book donations. **PAGE 3**



A 'bittersweet' gift of literacy

Aurora students receive books from Alyssa Cares Foundation

By **BOYD FLETCHER**

THE AURORA SENTINEL

AURORA | As a classroom full of kindergartners showed off new books to one another, Carole Hemmelgarn smiled while choking back tears of sadness.

The donated books to students at Iowa Elementary School are gifts from Hemmelgarn, her husband, Joseph, and their son, Griffin, in honor of their daughter Alyssa who died in March 2007, a little over a week after being diagnosed with leukemia. Coincidentally, just weeks before her diagnosis Alyssa had donated her hair to Locks of Love, which makes wigs for chemotherapy patients.

"It is bittersweet," she said, wiping a tear from her right eye. "To just see the kids and know that we are making a bit of difference is great. This is the dream that we had, that the kids would be talking to their friends about the books."

Roughly a year after losing their daughter, the family formed the Alyssa Cares Foundation to donate one new book to every student in a school three times a year.

Alyssa Hemmelgarn's passion for reading and the fact that she rarely was without a book in her hands was the inspiration for the foundation.

Joseph Hemmelgarn, Alyssa's father, said there was no deciding moment for the family as to when and how to honor their daughter, and that the book donation idea was something that materialized naturally without much planning.

"Part of it was, she passed away from leukemia, but it was so quick — 10 days," he said, his voice shaking with emotion. "So we didn't have that connection to leukemia, and I know a lot of foundations are started that way. But this, it just gave her life. I mean, she was a very compassionate little girl."

Joseph Hemmelgarn said the school met the foundation's criteria because of low CSAP reading scores and a high population of students on free and reduced lunch.

He said the program will expand to two additional schools along the Front Range later this year.

The Hemmelgarns will visit Iowa Elementary twice more this year, donating roughly \$7,500 worth of new books to the children.

This first batch of books were purchased through donations from family and friends of Alyssa, though Carole Hemmelgarn says she hopes to see local businesses adopt schools through the program and keep up the donations on an annual basis.

"If we can get an employer to say, 'This is our school and we are going to come back and support them,' it would be great," she said. "We really think this is a community project. These kids are going to stay here and work somewhere in the area, and (employers) want a good, educated employee."

Each student at Iowa had a chance to browse the selection of more than 50 books and take home a book of their choice. The books were selected in part by a panel of teachers and librarians, but there were also a handful of Alyssa's favorite reads out on the tables as well. Included in her favorites are "The Good Dog" by Avi, "Tiger Rising" by Kate DiCamillo — about a 12-year-old boy in Florida who stumbles upon a wild tiger — and several volumes from the "Harry Potter" series. Carole Hemmelgarn also included some of the first books Alyssa read, including "Curious George" and "Clifford the Big Red Dog" — books she says she hopes can inspire other children like they inspired her daughter.

On hand to help students pick a good story and hand out books were several of Alyssa's best friends.

"Well, it is really special to me because she really liked to read, and she was the reason why I started to like reading," said Alyssa's friend Amber Robinson, 11. "I wasn't that strong of a reader until I met Alyssa."

She said in the four years the two knew each other, they had become great friends and that Alyssa always had a book suggestion for her.

For Emma Hurley and Grace Zimmerman, both 11, volunteering to help out with the drive meant spending time with Alyssa's family. The girls also said that in a way, it was helping to keep their friend's spirit alive.

A lot of kids in our class don't really think about her that much," she said. "But this is a cool way just to help us — not that we would forget — but help us remember who she was."

"It's good to see these kids smiling and laughing because it's a reminder of who she was," Zimmerman said. "And she laughed a lot."



Heather A. Langway/The Aurora Sentinel

Hallie Hobart, kindergartner at Iowa Elementary School, looks through books donated by the Alyssa Cares Foundation on Tuesday, Sept. 9. The foundation was formed in March roughly a year after the family lost their daughter to Leukemia.