

## GRAY MATTERS

# Every kid should have 'a book too good to put down'

Good idea: Every child should own a home library

By **Andrea White** | October 11, 2014 | Updated: October 14, 2014 10:24am

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Photo: Courtesy Books Between Kids

Amy Barnes and Sandra Ahlhorn, founders of Books Between Kids.

**Idea team:** Sandra Ahlhorn and Amy Barnes.

**Idea:** Every student should have a home library.

**Where the idea came from:** Barnes read a 2010 Houston Chronicle [editorial describing "summer slide,"](#) the tendency of low-income students to lose ground in literacy over the summer months. Ahlhorn heard Superintendent Terry Grier bemoan the seasonal drop in literacy at a luncheon. Independently, each woman decided to tackle the problem.

**How the idea grew:** Ahlhorn organized a book drive at River Oaks Elementary, where her daughter attended. River Oaks students brought "Green Eggs and Ham," and "Goodnight Moon," and other favorites by the boxful.

Barnes had an epiphany when she looked around her home and realized, "I have books everywhere and my kids are growing out of them."

The two women, both avid readers, teamed up to form the non-profit "Books Between Kids."

"I feel like we are on a wave," Barnes says of the effort. "Everyone we asked has helped. Our volunteers are amazing. And the support has been there, right from the beginning."

For instance, their first year the pair applied for a grant from Better World Books, an online bookseller that raises money to support literacy. They hoped to receive 10,000 books. Instead, a

tractor trailer pulled up loaded with six times that many.

Now parents, churches, synagogues, scout troops, and businesses like the Hanna Andersson clothing store host book drives for Books Between Kids. Volunteers transport the gently used books to dropoff the points described in the [Books Between](#)

[Kids website](#). And every Saturday, three shifts of 25 volunteers sort the books in an un-airconditioned warehouse in west Houston, weeding out shabby or inappropriate books.

Ahlhorn and Barnes coordinate delivery with Houston Independent School District. Last year, they served 20,000 elementary students and gave away 140,000 books. At their book celebrations, students are allowed to pick six books apiece.

Ahlhorn and Barnes love to go to the book celebrations. "The kids are as excited as if they were receiving bikes," Barnes says.

**Deeper roots:** "As a parent I have to make my kids put their books down," says Barnes. "I want all kids to have that moment: a book that is too good to put down."

"Reading takes you places," says Ahlhorn. "You learn things from books. You go on adventures."

**The urgency:** Roughly 85% of HISD elementary school students are low-income, and it's well documented that low-income students read far less over the summer than their higher-income peers.

"Books are luxury items for people who are trying to make ends meet; food and shelter have to be their priority," Ahlhorn says. Yet if students don't learn to read well as children, their future lives as adults are bleaker. "I've heard that state prison needs are determined by the literacy rates in third grade. Getting books in the hands of kids can impact their whole lives."

**Next steps:** Ahlhorn owns and manages a printing shop with her husband. Barnes, a stay-at-home mother, has degrees in literature and psychology from University of Houston.

Books Between Kids is a volunteer organization. Barnes and Ahlhorn don't draw salaries. Proceeds from their [Nov. 13 fundraiser](#) will help pay for their warehouse and delivery costs.

**Dreaming big:** Both women would like to see every student in HISD and beyond enjoy a home library.

**Bottom line:** When kids become book owners, some become book lovers.

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