

Book drive for border cities expands kids' possibilities

It was just a simple gift. But it opened up a world of ideas for **Brianna Bazan**.

She was in first grade when she got her first new book from Starr Readers. Since then, the 15-year-old student at the Early College High School in Rio Grande City has become an avid reader.

Reading opened her mind to so many possibilities, she said, that she now wants to become a medical researcher.

Brianna, who is in a wheelchair due to a spinal cord injury when she was 3, wants to explore a career in medicine and change the lives of others



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in her situation.

"I would like to help and make things a little easier for them," she said. "I want to help develop new ideas for a person who has to live with this condition."

Brianna is one of the thousands of children who get a holiday gift every year that could have a lasting impact. The books come from Farmers

Branch resident **Karen Furlong**, the founder of Starr Readers.

The corporate flight attendant for NetJets will be taking almost 13,000 new books this year to the school districts of Rio Grande City and Roma in Starr County, which sits along the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of the schoolchildren there live in *colonias* with no sewer or running water.

When she started the book drive 12 years ago, Furlong could fill her car with books and make the 10-hour trip with a friend or relative. But the vehicles get bigger each year as the number of books swells.

This year, for the first time, she will use a 20-foot van she is renting with a deep discount from Penske. She will drive all night next week and go directly to a storage facility in Rio Grande City, where school district employees will help unload all the books the next morning.

But before she leaves her home, where all the books are collected, she will have sorted them all by school and grade. First Book, a nonprofit that works to provide books to needy children, works with her and gives her hefty discounts for most of the books.

She buys them with dona-

tions she gets from across the state. All donations go toward buying the books, and donors can contribute on her website, StarrReaders.com, year-round. Or they can send a check to 3125 Damascus Way, Dallas, Texas 75234.

Through the years, students have received a wide array of books, from the Harry Potter series to the Wimpy Kid and Lemony Snicket series, and to stories on Mexican artist **Frida Kahlo** and Pittsburgh Pirates legendary baseball player **Roberto Clemente**.

This year, a book on U.S. Supreme Court Justice **Sonia Sotomayor**, *The Mambo Kings*

Play Songs of Love, a history of the White House, and the *The Glass Collector* await a new home or a school library.

When Furlong has visited the homes of some of the families in Starr County, she has seen the mud floors and sparse furniture. But many of the parents are full of gratitude and hope, as they see their children develop a love for reading that is so crucial to success early in school.

Furlong can't forget one little boy who asked her to promise to return this year.

"Of course, I promised," she said. "And we are making good on that promise."