

# Annual book drive for kids hits new heights



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**T**hursday wasn't just a typical day for **Karen Furlong** in her annual book drive for the schoolchildren of Rio Grande City.

For the first time since 2002, when she started informally collecting books by herself for Starr County schools, the Farmers Branch resident reached 10,000 books.

Gone are the days when she could fit all the collected books in her car and drive them down with her mom.

These days, she has to rent a 16-foot van to first pick up the books and then another one to drive them down to the border town, where she spent summers with her grandparents.

The 10-hour journey has become a labor of love for Furlong, a flight attendant at a private aviation company.

"We'll be able to hit every child this year," she said, beaming, even though it means an overnight task of sorting and organizing the books, sometimes with the help of her close friend **Marty Merrill**.

But that's OK, she said. Knowing that books can give a child the chance to dream of a better life is reward enough for her.

Many of the 9,000-plus schoolchildren of Rio Grande City live in unincorporated *colonias*, without sewer service or health care. It's one of the poorest counties in the



**Karen Furlong** sits in a truck loaded with books bound for children in Rio Grande City. She has been conducting an annual book drive since 2002.

country.

More important, though, reaching 10,000 books means expanding her dream to two annual book drives, instead of one. This year, Furlong believes she has enough donations and books to also do a summer reading project for the schools.

And with \$5.4 billion in education budget cuts implemented by the state Legislature last year, her Starr Readers book drive could not come at a better time. School libraries in some of the poorer school districts in Texas have had to cut back on acquisitions, even as their enrollments have gone up.

For many children, the school libraries can be a refuge in more ways than one.

The libraries have received classics in years past. This year, elementary school libraries will receive copies of *The Librarian of Basra* by Jeannette Winter — the true story of a heroic Iraqi librarian who works to save her collection of books in her war-torn community — and the Baby Mouse series.

This year, each first-grader also will receive his or her own copy of *Muncha, Muncha, Muncha* by Candace Fleming.

High school libraries will get the Alex Cross detective series by James Patterson and John Grisham books.

Furlong encourages donors to check out her website, StarrReaders.com, to contribute. She will be accepting donations through the holidays.

All the work is done by volunteers. Nobody gets paid.

She says she's now married to her book drive and has even made provisions to keep it going if anything happens to her. The children's reaction and anticipation of her visit every year to the schools has become her reward.

Last year, an 8-year-old girl waited until all the other kids had left and told Furlong, "I know I can be the best reader."

That's what keeps her going and the donations rolling in.

"When it comes to the kids, we're all united in this."