

North Texas drive will put a new book in the hands of Rio Grande City students this year



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It will be years before it's a mighty oak tree, but the small acorn that Farmers Branch resident **Karen Furlong** planted in 2002 keeps growing new branches.

Even as she dealt with health problems in a Dallas hospital this week, Furlong was passing the proverbial hat around for her annual Starr Readers book drive for the impoverished schoolchildren of Rio Grande City along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Last year, the NetJets flight attendant raised enough money to buy and deliver 10,028 books to almost as many schoolchildren in Starr County.

This December, she could surpass that number to make sure each of the 10,771 public school students there has a brand new book for the holidays. First Book, a nonprofit that works to provide books to needy children, is working with Furlong to get deep discounts and ensure she can buy enough books, all of which will be hardcover for the first time.

"This year is shaping up to be a great year, and next year we may be able to offer scholarships and take a book festival into the *colonias*," she said from her hospital bed.

Many of the schoolchildren live in unincorporated areas of the county, where there is no sewer service and little health care.

But Furlong knows that the impulse to dream, and dream big, knows no limitations.

She has seen too many bright and gifted children there who "have the mind but not the money."

She also has seen many children who would like to get into the sciences. That's where her cousin, neuroscientist **Rebecca Calisi-Rodríguez**, stepped in to help with as much enthusiasm and energy as Furlong.

She started the Facebook page Starr Scientists for students in Starr County to connect with mentors and opportunities in the sciences all over the world. Calisi-Rodríguez posts everything from sea slug discoveries to how to write your college application to be more competitive.

"We need diversity in science for science to progress," Calisi-Rodríguez said. "We need broad experience and broad perspectives."

Another cousin has come up with the idea to do a book festival. And if that's not possible in the *colonias*, then perhaps taking a bookmobile through the neighborhoods is the answer.

The goal is to get a book into the hands of a child.

Each school library will be getting titles by Newbery Award winners, and also works by **Tomie dePaola**, **Jeanette Winter**, **Pat Mora**, **Gabriel García Márquez** and **Alex Espinoza**.

Donations by check to Starr Readers can be mailed to 3125 Damascus Way, Dallas, Texas 75234.

This year's book drive is a far cry from the small venture Furlong began in 2002, when she could drive down all the books in one car, with her mother along for company.

Today, she needs a 16-foot van — and lots of determination — to deliver the books.

"It just has to be done," she said. "Whatever our problems are, they're nothing compared to theirs. They need to have books so they can imagine a different life for themselves."