

# Ashland Bookcase Project gives to children one last time

By BECKY MEZIERE / T-G Correspondent  
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Photos: Liz A. Hosfeld, Times-Gazette.com



For Ashland Bookcase Project chair Julia Wright, Sunday's reception and presentation is what she works for all year.

After months of ordering, organizing, having cases built and selecting recipients, Wright and the Project's volunteers presented 60 bookcases brimming with new books to students from the local Head Start programs at Jack's Place at Trinity Lutheran Church.

In its seventh and final year, Wright and the Ashland Bookcase Project have given

nearly 500 cases to children in hopes of improving literacy and instilling a lifelong love of books.

"We've seen children go from at-risk to loving to read," said Wright, who challenged an audience of parents to take the time to read to their children.

The afternoon celebration included refreshments and an animated rendition by Dave Kowalka of the book "That's Good! That's Bad!" by author Margery Cuyler. The former teacher and principal, and now professor and storyteller, read to parents to give them examples of how to read to and engage their children in books. Volunteer Seth Gasche, of Denbow-Gasche Funeral Home, also took time to honor Wright and the contributions she's made with the Ashland Bookcase Project.

Each child received a handmade bookcase — built by students from the Construction Technology program at the Ashland County-West Holmes Career Center and the master carpenters at Trinity Lutheran Church — donned with a personalized nameplate and filled with \$600 worth of new books.

"I see families that are absolutely in awe of what they are getting," Sullivan Head Start supervisor Denise Swartz said. "We see quality books getting into homes that may have not had them before and families we now know are spending time reading with their children."

One by one, students' names were called and they were presented with their new bookcases.

“Such a joy to see those children’s faces and their eyes light up,” Ashland Head Start Supervisor Donna Swartz said. “Just to think they are all getting such a special piece of furniture that can stay with them forever and they can grow with it.”

Misty Tester, mother of 2018 recipient Alaynna Foster, knows the impact a bookcase can make in a child’s life. Tester’s son, Drake, and stepdaughter, Lilah, also received bookcases in previous years.

“It’s a really good program,” Tester said. “... They say read to your kids every single night, so we read to them every night. It calms them down. It relaxes them.”

Four-year-old Kristen Jones was enthusiastic about her new bookcase.

“(I am) going to go home and put the books in it,” said Kristen with her new Disney Pluto stuffed dog in tow, which was a special gift atop each of the bookcases. “... My mom’s gonna read to me.”

Like Jones, Olivia Swartz was a bookcase recipient in the project’s inaugural year. Olivia, now 9 years old and a volunteer, loves to come back every year and share her love for reading.

“I just like to be here with the kids,” said Olivia, who now knows she wants to be a teacher one day. “I like to read to the kids.”

“When I got my bookcase, I was really excited,” she added. “I still have my bookcase in my room.”

Wright said several hundred people have made the Bookcase Project a reality throughout the past seven years. Contributors this year included Ashland County Homemakers, Delta Kappa Gamma (teachers’ honorary society), Wal-Mart, Northeast District Homemakers, **Ashland County Community Foundation, IMPACT Youth Council**, Norma June Foundation and Trinity Lutheran Church, along with many other generous individuals.

“In seven years we have touched a lot of lives,” Donna Swartz said. “... I think it has a big part in these students’ start in literacy.”