

# Rhode Island Spotlight: Books Are Wings



The sea of children's books stretched across lunch tables lined up at the cafeteria of an elementary school in Central Falls. Long before the students arrived for a special morning assembly, volunteers were setting up and ready to hand out books, bookmarks and apples to hundreds of 1st through 4th graders at the Ella Risk Elementary School.

By 8:45 the 2nd-graders began arriving, and a buzz spread through the cafeteria.

The goal by the end of the day was to encourage students to read and to help them start — or build on — a home library of their own.



“A lot of these schools don't have book fairs because children don't come with money to buy books, and so we are that for them,” said Jocelynn White, director of the non-profit organization called Books Are Wings, a conduit for new and gently used book donations. Many of the donations come from families whose children are grown, but don't want to throw away what was such an important part of their childhood.

The organization officially began 13 years ago after one of its founders, Elizabeth Denigan, was trying to figure out what to do with books she cleaned from her own daughter's shelves. That morphed into a group that now takes in more than a 1,000 books a week at its offices in Pawtucket, organizes them and sends them right back out into the community.

The assembly we saw was repeated dozens of times every year at schools in Central Falls, Providence and Pawtucket, areas Books Are Wings focuses on because some resident families might not have enough money to buy their own books.

“We say it's food or books. The children and parents we work with need the essentials of food on the table and heat in their homes. When they only have pennies to spend, the book, unfortunately, is what falls down,” White said. “And so we're there to kind of help support that piece.”



During our visit to the Ella Risk Elementary School in Central Falls, Principal Mike Templeton introduced White, whose theme was making healthy choices. She read a book called *Henry Gets Moving*, about a hamster who has poor eating and exercise habits, but feels much better after he makes some simple changes in his life.

The kids got a surprise visit from Henry himself, then did a project decorating bookmarks before receiving a new copy of the Henry book and an apple followed by a trip to the main table to choose two books to take home. By the end of the morning, the school had all the grades go through the same process.



Books Are Wings has bins set up in half a dozen public libraries across the state and holds book drives throughout the year. They saw 1,500 school children in February and handed out 3,000 books. “What we really want people to understand is that these are books for kids that they want to choose themselves,” White said. “They really want that beautiful, brand new book, but they also may want and be interested in the *Magic Tree House* book that’s been read a million times before because that’s what they’re interested in.”

We asked White if she ever thought about where the kids who they serve would be if Books Are Wings didn’t exist.

“I do. We actually had someone come to us who graduated and is working. She said, ‘I remember you because you came to the library when I was a kid and I got a book from you every year.’ When they find out they get to take a book, even if they know who we are, they get so excited. The excitement is about, ‘This is mine and I get to keep it and I don’t have to bring it back.’ Many times children will say to me, ‘I don’t have any money,’ and we’ll say, ‘That’s okay. Today, this is for you.’”

*If you want to see the video version of this story go to [RhodeIslandSpotlight.org](http://RhodeIslandSpotlight.org). If you know of a person or organization who you think deserves the Spotlight, send an email to [Jim@RhodeIslandSpotlight.org](mailto:Jim@RhodeIslandSpotlight.org)*