

## Making kids reading-rich

KAREN MURRAY

Colleen Ludington

**Chairperson and Co-Founder of First Book-Charlotte****MOTTO:** "Those who are kind to the poor, lend to the Lord, and He will reward them for what they have done." -- Proverbs 19:17.

**AGE:** 37.

**HOMETOWN:** Born in Boston. Moved from Orlando to Weddington in 2004 for her husband's job.

**HER WORK:** A former executive in the entertainment industry, Ludington was drawn to volunteer work in the inner city of Nashville, Tenn., which inspired her to write a children's book, "What I Like About You."

The book tells children from all walks of life that they are irreplaceable and made with a unique purpose. All royalties from the book -- now in its fifth printing -- have been donated to children's charities. In 2005, while researching organizations that provide books to under-served children, Ludington learned about First Book, an international nonprofit organization whose mission is to give children from low-income families the opportunity to read and own their first new books. In partnership with Erin McClure, literacy facilitator at Pinewood Elementary School in Charlotte, Ludington launched the First Book-Charlotte chapter in 2006, which serves Mecklenburg and Union counties.

In May 2007, with the assistance of a volunteer advisory board, First Book-Charlotte held its first Gala and Fundraiser at ImaginOn, raising enough money to grant 15,000 new children's books to local organizations meeting the First Book criteria of serving at least 80 percent of children from low income families.

For a year, each child in a recipient group will receive a personal library of six to 12 new books, chosen by the group organizer from an extensive publisher's catalog. Because of the unique relationship between First Book and publishing partners, the organization is able to supply groups with popular, best-selling children's books at a cost of only \$2-\$2.50 per book.

Corporate partners including Time Warner Cable, Sun Trust Mortgage, the Hearst Service Center, Bearing Point and Transamerica have helped First Book-Charlotte gain a strong foundation. While most recipient groups to date are in Charlotte, First Book-Charlotte is actively seeking applications from groups in Union County.

Book grants are available immediately. Groups also can apply for additional books through the national First Book organization and can receive books through other means, such as a national publisher's distribution of overstocks.

Ludington also is active with the Women's Impact Fund, Charlotte Women of Vision and the Weddington Community Church. She and her husband, Jim, have two children: Jacob, 4, and Sam, 2, and also share their home with Jim's father, Al.

**WHY SHE DOES IT:** "For many of these children, there are no books in the home, or even in the neighborhood. To give a child the gift of reading and the pride of ownership of a new book is such a reward, for both the child and the sponsoring organization.

"It lifts up the child and the family," said Ludington. "First Book makes it so easy for groups to make an impact. Even a contribution of \$25 buys 10 books -- books that would sell for \$12 or \$14 and simply be out of reach for many of these families. It's a tremendous opportunity to make a difference and also help teach my sons the value of giving."

**WHAT OTHERS SAY:** "Colleen contacted our group to help get the word out about First Book-Charlotte, and we have benefited greatly, receiving more than 1,500 books. She has also gone above and beyond, bringing in another child's book author to talk to our children, and donating 300 books for our summer camp program. The children are so excited to receive the books." -- *Rachel Harris, Starfish Academy, YMCA of Greater Charlotte.*

**CONTACT:** First Book-Charlotte serves low-income children's groups in Mecklenburg and Union counties. Anyone interesting in volunteering, participating on the advisory board or nonprofit organizations seeking grants for books should visit [www.firstbookcharlotte.org](http://www.firstbookcharlotte.org). Everyday heroes.

### Who's Your Hero?

Know someone who should be spotlighted as a Neighbors of Union County Everyday Hero? Please tell us who and why, and give us a way to get in touch with you. Call us at 704-289-6576 or email [union@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:union@charlotteobserver.com).

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