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NEWS

Statewide initiative delivers books to students

The New Worlds Reading Initiative is a result of legislation passed in Florida in 2021 that created a statewide effort to help about 500,000 elementary students be able to read at grade level. The project is based on a free book delivery program advancing literacy and a love of reading. Laurie Kraus, literacy advocate at Hollywood Hills Elementary, reads a book from the New Worlds Reading Initiative with Kahleah Henton, a third-grader at the school.

By Scott Luxor

South Florida elementary students who are having a hard time keeping up with their reading level are now being given a boost.

The New Worlds Reading Initiative is a result of legislation passed in Florida in 2021 that created a statewide effort to help the over 550,000 elementary students who are reading below grade level. The project is based on a free book delivery program advancing literacy and a love of reading.

Since last December, the program has enrolled over 100,000 Florida students to receive a new book, which gets delivered every month to their homes.

The project is administered by the University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, which selected Scholastic as a partner in the book delivery initiative. Already, over 300,000 books have been distributed.

When a family enrolls in the program, they can pick topics that are of interest to their child. A book is mailed to the child every month of the school year based on the chosen topics and in the language they prefer.

Lasting leaders

The leaders of the Lastinger Center for Learning weighed in on being chosen to lead the statewide effort and their hopes for the potential impact of the new initiative.

Philip Poekert, the center's director, said he is passionate about what he hopes can be accomplished with the free book program.

"It's exciting that we have enrolled over 100,000 students in just a handful of months since we've gotten off the ground," he said.

Part of Poekert's enthusiasm is that they were recognized on the floor of the Florida House of Representatives for a bill that was passed unanimously and in bipartisan fashion.

"It really feels great to be a part of something that is so widely embraced by Floridians across the state," he said.

Poekert said he is focused on more than performance.

"We want to give books to kids that will make them excited and eager to read more," he said. "We know that that energy, that eagerness and that enthusiasm will keep them going even when they struggle. We also want to build a



SCOTT LUXOR/CONTRIBUTOR

YMCA AT FIFTY

Four generations of Boynton Beach family make fitness a tradition

By Alex Kushel

Laura Holmsted and her family have a passion for fitness and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. As long-time members of the DeVos-Blum Family YMCA of Boynton Beach, it's become a way of life.

As the YMCA of South Palm Beach County is celebrating its 50th anniversary, the generational family has continued the tradition of heading to the Y.

Laura's mother, Sara Lynch, participates in several workout classes each week. Laura's daughter, Tiffany Peterson, works with a personal trainer and enjoys workouts at the gym. Tiffany's daughter, Aubrey, attends childcare at the facility and her husband Jake also exercises there. Laura's husband Jan is active and spends at least three hours each day at the YMCA while their daughter Trina is also a member.

"What I think is cool is that our whole family works out every single day," Laura said. "We have instilled that we eat healthy and we workout, and it's part of our lives. I can't even imagine not doing it. I think it's a really neat thing for us, especially that we get to all workout together a lot."

Laura and Jan have been members at the YMCA in Boynton Beach for nearly 15 years. Laura participates in Zumba, Pound, weightlifting and several classes while heading to the gym each day of the week. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Laura also showed her dedication by participating in classes from her home through Zoom with YMCA instruc-



Sara Lynch, 84, her daughter Laura Holmsted, 61, of Boynton Beach workout at the DeVos-Blum Family YMCA in Boynton Beach.

tors.

"I love it and enjoy coming here and I have made so many friends," Laura said. "We are really close with the instructors and the people we take classes with here and everyone is so friendly. I feel like it's a big family and I wouldn't think of going anywhere else. The Y brings family and friends together. They do a lot throughout the year for adults and kids with events. We get together with the instructors and socialize. It's a big part of my life, and it's special."

Tiffany started at the YMCA in Boynton Beach as a cheerleading coach on Saturday mornings while in high school. She also participated in Zumba classes with friends during college. After later becoming a parent, she came to the realization

she can exercise at the gym while her daughter attends the childcare program at the facility.

"I was walking by and the kids in childcare looked like they were having fun," Tiffany said. "We were excited for our daughter. She knows everyone's name there. She is playing and loves it. It's the same staff members all the time and they get to know the kids. They invest so much time into the kids, which is amazing. I am with a personal trainer for three days and I do my own cardio and workouts on the other days. I get to workout with my dad a lot. It's a morning routine and I get an hour to myself. It's a nice break as a mom."

Laura, Sara, Tiffany and Trina initially started taking spin classes together when



Sara Lynch, 84, right, her daughter Laura Holmsted, 61, left, of Boynton Beach, Laura's daughter, Tiffany Peterson, 32, and her daughter, Aubrey Peterson, 3, of Lake Worth meet up at the DeVos-Blum Family YMCA in Boynton Beach. They are four generations of women that are members of the YMCA. This year the YMCA of South Palm Beach County is celebrating its 50th anniversary. **CARLINE JEAN / SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL PHOTOS**

they first joined as members. They have been able to form a bond with instructors and the staff.

"It's always been a very happy and positive, family-oriented environment," Tiffany said. "The teachers have been here a long time. We get to know each other outside the YMCA and are friends."

Sara participates in several different classes and enjoys the bike, weights and chair Pilates.

"I have made a lot of friends in the classes that I take," Sara said. "It feels like family. I love it and I'll never stop. At my age, I can do a lot more than most people and it's all due to exercise."

DeVos-Blum Family YMCA Executive Director Barry Davis said they are having 50 events for 50 years as part of the anniversary theme. They will also have an upcoming summer camp for nine weeks with over 200 kids participating.

The Boynton Beach

YMCA had its annual Healthy Kids Day last month. The free event, open to all ages, attracted over 2,000 people and included rock climbing walls, a petting zoo, lawn games, bike riding and a color run.

"The YMCA is all about mind, spirit and body," Davis said. "It was a day to celebrate our community, families and kids. It's a pretty special event here in Boynton."

He said the staff enjoys interacting with members each day, including the time spent with Laura and her family.

"Nothing is more special than seeing history right here, and it's amazing," Davis said. "It's more than just going to the gym. It's about the community and the interaction that happens outside of this room that makes it special."

Laura said she is excited for an opportunity to continue the tradition and legacy as members of the

YMCA in Boynton Beach.

"My granddaughter is watching me do Zumba and she can hear the music and wants to dance," she said. "Hopefully, we can instill it in her to workout so it's a part of her life. I can't wait to workout with my granddaughter here one day."

According to the Y, the YMCA of South Palm Beach County began as a single branch in 1972. It manages programs and services within the Southern Palm Beach County area and includes The Peter Blum Family YMCA of Boca Raton, 6631 Palmetto Circle S, and The DeVos-Blum Family YMCA of Boynton Beach, 9600 S. Military Trail.

The Y allows all community members to participate in membership programs regardless of their ability to pay fees, and they provide scholarship assistance each year through annual contributions.

Visit ymcaspb.org.