

A Mom's Plea for Library Books Brought in 15,000 —And Transformed Her Small Town

Lit lovers from all over the country—including authors Sherman Alexie and Neil Gaiman—sent books to reopen the rural school library.



Margaret Garcia sorts books for shelving in the new Indian Valley Library Collective. Photo by Jane Braxton Little.



posted Sep 19, 2016

Books change lives. Everyone reading this knows that. But what about 15,000 books donated from around the world to a struggling rural school, where the library has been closed for a decade? That many books can change a community.

At the cusp of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges sits Greenville, California, a town of 1,130 residents. The town and the surrounding Indian Valley community are right now exploring all the benefits of this gift—enough volumes to fill several libraries in a place with scant library services.

Books, says Garcia, offer a world beyond the isolation that can breed intolerance.

Like every good book, there's a story here.

Margaret Elysia Garcia wasn't thinking about the shuttered sawmills and empty storefronts of Indian Valley when she posted a blog entry titled "Just. One. Book." She was thinking about kids.

Her daughter was about to start seventh grade at Indian Valley Academy, a charter school that shares facilities with Greenville Junior/Senior High School. Her son had just finished eighth grade. Then there were the children of the ranchers and loggers who share the valley of hayfields and wet meadows that unfold beneath jagged peaks. All these kids had been passing through the defunct school library for years, forbidden to check out books because the school hadn't had a librarian since 1997.

But why would they even want to browse these books? The dusty shelves were filled with old pulp fiction. There were few books by people of color, and hardly any works of quality by women. Certainly, no current literature.

Garcia had relocated to Indian Valley from Los Angeles, and she was appalled. A writer and former teacher, she is outspoken and passionate about social justice issues, especially education. Any hint of racial unfairness is apt to evoke a response that starts slowly, her deep, rich voice building to a crescendo.

Books, says Garcia, offer a world beyond the isolation that can breed intolerance. "I hear sweet kids say stupid things about Asian Americans and Chicanos. A little diverse information could go a long way in helping stem rural American racism, sexism, and homophobia."

"It's a scary place for a mind to atrophy."

Research shows that Americans are both reading more and consider libraries important to community vitality. Yet the Greenville school library seemed hopeless to

Garcia. Every time she passed its paltry collection of unread books, "a little bit of my heart was broken," she says. So at the close of school in June, the principals of the two schools agreed to let her solicit donations of books.

The "Just. One. Book." post described the sad state of the library and the economic decline of Indian Valley. Unemployment tops 10 percent. Two-thirds of the children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

"It's a scary place for a mind to atrophy," Garcia wrote.

This is what she asked for: "Just one book. A real book. Something literary or fun—something that speaks to your truth, their truths. Something that teaches them something about the world and makes them feel less alone." She linked her post to two online writers

groups.

She woke up to 3,000 hits, including reposts by bestselling authors Neil Gaiman, Eric Idle, and Sherman Alexie.

Within days, books began arriving.

The package area at the Greenville post office filled as if it were the holidays. With FedEx and UPS also making daily deliveries, a buzz began building across the valley as residents talked about it from antique store to neighborhood bar—the rural equivalent of a meme going viral. Kids on summer vacation began showing up to help sort books, sneaking peeks at titles they'd never heard of before shelving them. Parents and retirees volunteered to log titles and donors into a database. The local rodeo queen loaded her pickup truck with cardboard containers to take to a recycling center.

Today, Garcia and her team of volunteers at the community's newly named Indian Valley Collective Library have so far logged 10,000 books with more than 5,000 to go.

This is an unlikely setting for a plot about a library. Indian Valley has never defined itself through literacy.

Home to Maidu Indians for millennia, in 1852 Indian Valley hosted a handful of ranchers who began catering to the forty-niners seeking gold in local streams and hillsides. The boom eventually went bust—long ago.

Today, the valley's sawmills are closed. So is the local hospital. And when the Plumas National Forest moved its Greenville District office to Quincy, the Plumas County seat, it took with it many of the families who volunteered in local schools, says Centella Tucker, whose family owns Greenville's only grocery store.

Revitalizing the library holds the hope of invigorating the community, says Tucker, one of many volunteers opening boxes from donors and cataloging titles and authors.

The school year started with the new library still strewn with stacks of books. Garcia is barefoot in the middle of it all, her vintage black-bowed shoes cast aside for comfort's sake. She guides one gobstruck student after another to a section she thinks will fascinate them.

“How much does this book cost?” asks one. Another: “Can I take this home for my dad to read?”

In a valley with no bookstore and the closest movie theater a winding 50-mile roundtrip, the wealth of information and entertainment now on display in the school library is something many of these kids have never encountered, says Garcia. She is arranging books by topics

The wealth of information and entertainment now on display in the school library is something many of these kids have never encountered.

designed to draw students' interests: culinary arts, makers and builders, and graphic novels—“700 of them for students intimidated by enormous blocks of text,” she says. The manga section is particularly popular.

The response from people around the world, donations from far-off places, is another facet of this story, Garcia says: “I love that they now have hope in a world where the news tells them every night how violent and horrible it has become—that they know for a fact that complete strangers can also be kind.”

The enthusiasm is spreading to students' parents, community residents, and retirees who haven't had kids in school for decades. Suddenly, everyone in Indian Valley is talking about reading.

“I've had supermarket conversations with people asking for book recommendations,” Garcia says.

How this enthusiasm will find its way to actual programs and real change is still a question. The school principals are planning book groups in the library for parents as well as students. Authors who donated books have offered to address students and the community via video.

In addition to possibilities for direct engagement around books, principal Jerry Merica-Jones is considering evening classes for students and adults: welding, resume writing and job application skills, internet resources and usage. “And what about an adult class probing potential business prospects in Plumas County? We need to share the expertise in this valley with the rest of the population,” he says.

Will the reading rate go up for students? We don't know, he says. For the community at large? Even less clear. “What we do know is this needs to go back to being a school for the entire community. The Indian Valley Library Collective is a start,” says Merica-Jones.

Libraries remain important parts of the community for a majority of Americans even as their role shifts to include access to technology and common spaces, according to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center. Sixty-six percent surveyed by Pew said closing a local library would have a major impact on their community. Other studies conducted by the American Library Association have credited libraries for increasing real-estate values and knitting people and neighborhoods together in a complex, ongoing process that promotes civic engagement.

No one thinks kids with books tucked under their arms are going to convince a gas station owner to launch a literary center in his tire showroom. But what if their parents began enrolling in geology and business classes at the local community college? What if the community insists on faster Wi-Fi to meet its expanding curiosity?

Just how many lives can a library change?



GET YES! BY EMAIL FREE!

Like what you’re reading? Get the best of YES! each week.

Email Address	Sign Up
---------------	----------------

Jane Braxton Little wrote this article for YES! Magazine. Based on the northern Sierra Nevada, Braxton Little writes about natural resources and communities for publications that include Audubon, High Country News, National Geographic, and Discover.



READ MORE

In Detroit, Freedom Schools Offer an Alternative to City’s Struggling Education System

The World’s Biggest School Meal Program Is Keeping Local Farmers in Business

Free College Tops Black Lives Reparations List

Comment on This Article

Follow Us



YES! Magazine, 284 Madrona Way NE, Ste 116, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110-2870 800/937-4451

