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Dolly Parton's Imagination Library arrives in Merced County



By [Beverly Barela](#)

First 5 Merced County and its partners, including Friends of the Merced County Library, Merced County Public Library, Merced County Office of Education and WIC, have readied Merced County children age birth to 5 to be the recipients of free books on a monthly basis starting around April 1 through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which was introduced in 1995 in her hometown of Sevier County, Tennessee, has become the leading early childhood book gifting program in the world.

Her idea was to create a lifelong love of reading in children, and inspire them to dream big and follow through.

It is based on the premise that parents will read books to their children if they have books in the home, but the absence of high quality books in the home is a deterrent.

The Imagination Library mails more than 1.7 million high-quality, age-appropriate books each month to registered children from birth to age 5.

Scott Waite, M.A., Executive Director of First 5 Merced County, told the Times, "It's a literacy program we can roll out to a large portion of the population.

"The goal is to make it so every child in Merced County receives books on a monthly basis.

“On a monthly basis, the program, Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, will mail out a high quality children’s book to anyone between birth and age 5 who is registered, so that a child enrolled at birth would have received 60 books by kindergarten.

“20,000 kids fall within the 0 to 5 window within Merced County.

“It is anticipated that 60 percent will participate in this program, which means there are 12,000 kids, birth to age 5, we would be able to provide books to.

“We have \$210,000 per year to work with for the next five years through Prop 10 for Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library.

“The first book is *The Little Engine That Could* and the last book is *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come!*, a kindergarten- themed book that transitions them out of the program.

“The first and last book is the same for every child, but in the middle the books are geared to the child’s age.

“For example, 2-year-olds get books that they can play and interact with, and the books get more and more substantive as the child matures.”

What is First 5 and how did it bring Dolly Parton’s program to Merced?

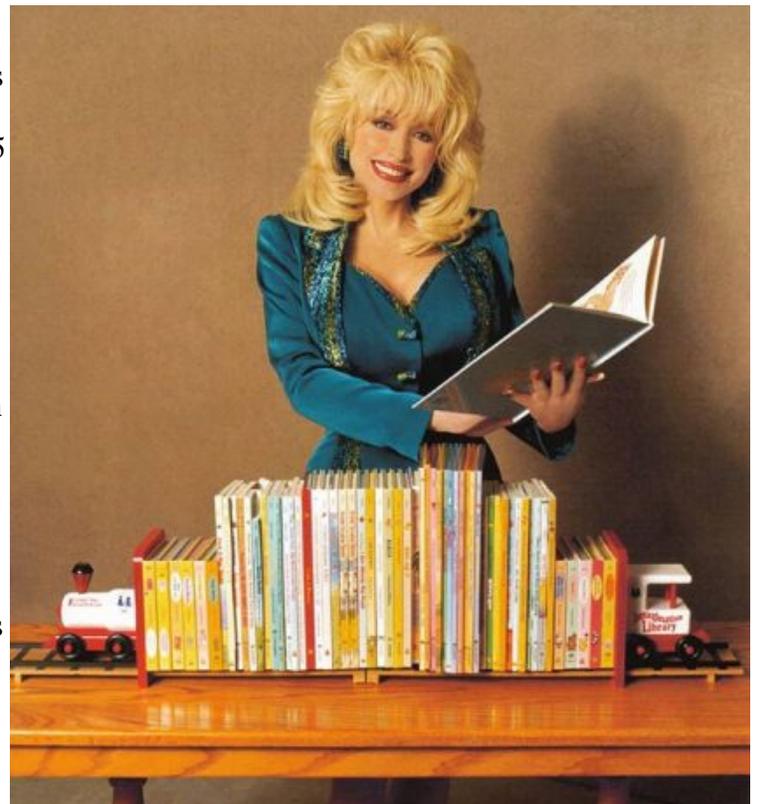
In 1998, voters passed Proposition 10, which added a tax to each pack of cigarettes sold and created First 5 California, officially called The California Children and Families Commission.

First 5 California distributes money to each of the 58 counties. A comprehensive system of education, health services, childcare, and other crucial programs has been developed as a result.

Waite informed the Times, “The money from Prop 10 is collected at the State level, and 20% is removed by statute and given to First 5 California.

“The revenue is between \$2 and \$2-1/2 million a year from the Tobacco Tax, and then we have a local Commission for each of the 58 counties.

“In Merced County, we have a 9-member First 5 Commission made up of various local government people, such as the Director of Human Services, the Director of Behavioral Health, the Public Health Officer, one County Supervisor, which is Josh Pedrozo, and the other five, who are representatives from each of the Supervisors’ five districts.



“This Commission controls how our Prop 10 money is spent locally.”

Waite, who has a Bachelor’s degree in Childhood Development and a Master’s degree in Organizational Leadership and has made children birth to age 5 the focus of his career, started working on a Needs Assessment as soon as he was hired by Merced County to be the Executive Director of First 5.

Waite explained, “We spend up through third grade teaching kids to read.

“After third grade, they start reading more independently to gain information, and if the student is on grade level, it increases the chances of their being a productive member of society later. It all starts with early childhood education.

“We found the percentage of kids whose parents read to them every day is 26.4 percent for Merced County and in California it’s 63.2 percent, which tells us we’re 36.8 percent below average.

“This data is from the 2018 Health Information Survey out of UCLA, abbreviated CHIS.

“The second data point is from third grade math and reading scores through the Department of Education. The percentage of kids testing at their grade level in literacy was 41 percent in Merced and 48.5 percent in California, so we are 7.5 percent below the State average there.

“We concluded there is a need for early literacy interventions in our county.

“We scanned best practices for literacy, and this program fit and it was cost effective as it allowed us to service a large portion of the population.

“Each book that ships costs us \$2.10.

“Friends of the Merced County Library is working on the final arrangements with the Post Office for a heavily discounted bulk mailing rate.

“WIC, Merced County Library, and the Merced County Office of Education have promised to promote the program.”

“People in Merced County can register their children for the program now at <https://imaginationlibrary.com/check-availability/>

“As soon as we get the Post Office approval, we will allow people to register via postcard, in person, at First 5, or online.

“I anticipate that the first books will be mailed around April 1, 2021.”