

Friday, September 11, 2009

OU students launch book rescue effort to help schools in need

By Eric Reikowski, media relations assistant

Some area schools are getting a helping hand thanks to an initiative spearheaded by two community-minded Oakland University students. Jon Besedich and Kyle Bonkowski recently collected more than 6,000 books from the libraries of three soon-to-be-shuttered schools in Bloomfield Hills and held a book sale to help raise money for cash-strapped schools in the area.

Besedich recalled how his studies at OU led him to help launch such a generous project. As part of a summer field experience, the senior elementary education major attended a special education day camp at Hickory Grove Elementary in Bloomfield Hills. The school was slated for closure and held books from two other schools scheduled to be shut down, he explained.

"A company was coming in that sold paper weight for money," said Besedich. "They were going to come in, pick up the books, sell them for weight and throw them away."

Besedich had a better idea. After getting the school's permission, he and Bonkowski, also a senior education major, loaded the books into a trailer and hauled them to Bonkowski's home. After spending the next several weeks sorting through their literary treasure trove, the pair decided to host a book sale and invited other students in the OU elementary education program to buy the books at a bargain: \$5 dollars for as many books as the buyer could carry.

"Starting an elementary school library can cost thousands of dollars," Bonkowski explained, noting that the book sale was a great way to give future teachers a head start on introducing students to the joys of reading. The remaining books will be donated to area schools, he said.

Proceeds from the two-day book sale were used to purchase supplies for schools in need. A trip to a local discount retailer netted nearly 300 notebooks, 200 boxes of crayons, 200 glue sticks and 100 boxes of markers, according to Bonkowski.

"People who witnessed what we were purchasing and heard about our project welcomed us with warm smiles and hugs," said Bonkowski. "We've had nothing but positive responses."

OU education professor Tim Larrabee shares the public's sentiment.

"They're just nice guys," said Larrabee, who has taught both Besedich and Bonkowski in the education program. "They're not receiving any financial gain from their efforts. They did this all on their own to help the kids. I think it's pretty outstanding."

Besedich and Bonkowski are also seeking support from the community so they can follow through on their plan to furnish school children from low-income areas with books, backpacks and other supplies. They have hopes of expanding the project and potentially creating a nonprofit organization.

"We hope more schools that are closing hear of us and ask us to take books off their hands," said Besedich, adding that many schools are struggling amid the economic downturn. "Education is what thrusts children into the future. It's our job to make sure they can be successful."

Bonkowski agreed. "We are in this project for the benefit of the elementary students as well as the community around us," he said. "I feel we are just doing the right thing."

Anyone interested in helping with the project can contact Besedich at jabesedi@oakland.edu.



OU students Jon Besedich and Kyle Bonkowski held a book sale to benefit local elementary schools.

SUMMARY

Two OU students collected and sold more than 6,000 books from the libraries of three closing schools in Bloomfield Hills to help raise money for local cash-strapped elementary schools.

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