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Unsung Heroes: Devotion to reading leads Carver to Raising Readers



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By Nirmalendu Majumdar/The Tribune
Linda Carver, a volunteer for the Reach Out and Read program, holds children's books at McFarland Clinic in Ames.

By Bob Zientara
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Editor's note: Each year, *The Tribune* solicits nominations from the community for its *Unsung Heroes* awards, which honor people who give generously but quietly of their time and talents to help others.

The Tribune received dozens of nominations, and a panel of Tribune staff and community members considered them carefully. Those chosen come from all walks of life and contribute in myriad ways, but the thread that unites them all is their spirit of giving.

Beginning July 4 and concluding with the *Citizen of the Year* Sunday, July 11, *The Tribune* will introduce you to these people.

Linda Carver woke up early one recent June morning to join Rue Ann Sams and Carol Elbert to label donated books in a lower-level break room at McFarland Clinic.

“The folks in pediatrics let us know when the books are here,” Carver said. “Sometimes, the organizations that donate want to have labels put on the books. When that happens, we volunteer to label them.”

Carver handles many other reading-related volunteer tasks, according Carolyn Jons, vice president of Raising Readers in Story County and one of two individuals to nominate Carver as an Ames Tribune Unsung Hero.

Jons cited Carver for “her passion for children’s reading, extensive experience with children’s books, love of reading aloud to her students and organizational skills.”

Raising Readers in Story County is the name of an umbrella organization involved in reading and literacy in many Mid-Iowa communities. Reach Out and Read, the program to which Carver has devoted so much of her volunteer time, is one of the programs sponsored by the overall group, Jons said.

“Linda quietly began to assume more of the tasks related to children’s books required for Reach Out and Read,” she said. “Before long, it was clear she had become primarily responsible for (Reach Out and Read) books.”

There is even a story about Carver in one of the Reach Out and Read books: “Over In the Meadow,” edited and illustrated by Joyce Voce.

“Long ago, while I was packed tight with other books in a dark box, some people in Ames, Iowa, began a long process that ended with me finding a new home with a happy child,” Voce wrote. “A special woman named Linda Carver was vital to that process.”

Jons praised Carver’s efforts for applying her experience as an educator to the book selection process and for taking on other jobs. Jons said Carver orders, processes and helps distribute the books.

Dr. Jill Alexander, medical director for Reach Out and Read, is a co-nominator of Carver’s and said Carver is “invaluable — she works hard and is always going above and beyond to support the doctors and make sure we have top quality books.”

Reach Out and Read endeavors to put books into the hands of children ages 6 months to 5 years, every time they and their parents visit their pediatricians.

At McFarland Clinic, there are eight such official visits for children in the target age group. Each time, doctors advise parents to read daily with their children, and each child gets a Reach Out and Read book at every visit.

“United Way of Story County and both of the Ames Rotary clubs got involved as local sponsors, too,” Elbert said as she and Sams helped Carver with the labeling project.

“And we get involved in other programs, such as taking gift boxes to Mid-Iowa Community Action and to area food pantries. When this site became qualified for Reach Out and Read, we started reading to parents and children in the waiting rooms.”

Sams, a retired elementary school teacher and former Ames Public Library librarian, said she enjoys the opportunity to blend her professional background with volunteer work for children.

Sams and Elbert both said they enjoyed working with Carver, whose professional background parallels her book-labeling companions.

A graduate of the University of Iowa, Carver taught in Texas, New Mexico, Minnesota and Iowa City before

spending the last 16 years of her career in Ames.

Her upbringing in Ottumwa was a pretty staid affair, Carver said.

“Our (local) book club once read ‘The Girls from Ames,’ but the stories that were told in that book weren’t like my life,” she said. “I was too much the (product of) traditional parents.”

But Carver developed a love for reading early on.

“With my family background, the library was the place to go,” she said. “We would go there, do some reading, check out books, take them home and read them. Then we’d go back again. It was kind of a holy place for us.”

After taking some time off from her career to start a family, Carver returned to teaching and ended up at Roosevelt Elementary School in Ames. It was there that she developed a love for reading aloud to her students.

“They were fifth- and sixth-graders,” she said. “You would think that, at that level, they’d lose interest in being read to.”

Carver found the opposite to be true, especially when she’d stop reading just as the plot approached a turning point. She found her “sophisticated,” middle-school-aged students pleading for more.

“Everyone likes being read to,” she said.

“That’s the kind of message we like to put across with the county reading program. It just plays into being with your children. Start early, do it as often as possible and keep doing it until they get old enough to (read) themselves.”

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Linda Carver

Age: 66

Address: 55529 282nd St., Ames

Birthplace: Ottumwa

Family: Husband, Alan; two grown children, Ryan and Natalie; five grandchildren

Fun fact(s): “As a teenager, I performed on a local TV talent show in Ottumwa, lip-synching The Chipmunk Song, ‘Christmas Don’t Be Late.’ I reprised that role in our school Christmas program when I was a young teacher in Kingsville, Texas.”

On volunteering: “Everyone likes being read to. That’s the kind of message we like to put across with the county reading program. It just plays into being with children. Start early, do it as often as possible, and keep doing it until they get old enough to (read) themselves.”

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