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TRAVERSE CITY — Only 44 percent of the region’s new crop of kindergarteners are up for the learning challenge they are about to encounter. A new community partnership plans to change that one child and one book at a time. It turns out that it “takes a village” to raise school-ready readers. Books from Birth unites Munson Medical Center Traverse City, Traverse Bay Sunrise Rotary Club and Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library Grand Traverse Region and Benzie County in supporting learning success from the day a child is born. Beginning Nov. 1, parents of the first 100 babies born at Munson Medical Center from the five-county area may register their child to receive a book monthly until the child reaches age 5. The consortium hopes to expand the program to include all 1,500 children coming into the world at Munson annually. “Research shows three critical ingredients for preparing children for kindergarten — familiarity with books, books in the home and reading everyday as soon as possible,” said Sharon Workman, Rotary Club’s Born to Read program volunteer. The new collaborative grows the region’s established book gifting initiatives.

Born to Read has distributed more than 9,000 titles to local children from infancy to age three with help from Traverse Area District Library and other affiliated groups. Books from Birth will get books in the hands of children until they enter the classroom. According to Books from Birth, 52 percent of children fail to read at grade level by the end of third grade. The deficit sets them on a long-term path of struggle, affecting quality of life, health and community economics. “We need to shed light on what a tragedy it is,” said the nonprofit’s chairperson Bob Robbins. “We can do better,” he added. Books from Birth coaches parents in their role in developing their child’s educational foundation. Support begins in the third trimester of pregnancy and continues throughout the five-year journey, the prime period for language skill development. “Parents are the secret sauce,” Robbins said. “We’ve got to get them to engage and make reading a routine.”

Books from Birth partner, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Grand Traverse Region, the local affiliate of Parton's international organization, provided more than 69,000 books to 3,500 area preschoolers since 2016. Children enrolled in Books from Birth receive 12 books per year mailed directly to homes at no cost to families. The total cost per child for five years is \$150. Traverse Bay Sunrise Rotary provided \$15,000 in seed money underwriting the fall program launch. Books from Birth aims to raise \$225,000 annually through grants and donations to provide every child born at Munson the opportunity to grow kindergarten readiness supported by the evidenced-based program. "That investment is wise and effective," said DPIL GTR coordinator Betsy Moore. The Dollywood Foundation selects titles, purchases books wholesale and handles shipping. Age appropriate classic and contemporary titles inspire imagination and spark a love of reading and learning, according to the organization. In 2021, Jolene Dixon (named for Parton's song "Jolene") was the first Kalkaska child to benefit from local book gifting initiatives. "I heard about the program before it was here in Kalkaska and was always looking forward to it," said mom Dana Dixon. In 2022, Jolene's baby brother John signed on and reading grew into a favorite family ritual. Jolene, now four, recognizes all letters of the alphabet. "She'll be ready for sure for kindergarten and reading," Dana said.

Register any child up to age five or donate at dpil-gtregion.org.

