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Incredible Kids

The Baldwin brothers spread the joy of reading

by j. poet

Teenagers Kyle and Brady Baldwin finish acting out the Virginia Lee Burton story *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* in the children's reading room at the Fairfield (Calif.) Cordelia Library. "And now," Brady asks with a smile, "who would like a free book?"

A happy chaos erupts as kids rush toward Kyle, 17, and Brady, 15, who hand each child a new book. "Can I keep this?" one kid asks. "Can I take it home with me?" another inquires.

The elated children clutch the books to their chests or hold them up high for their parents to see.

This is precisely the reaction the Baldwin brothers hoped for when they founded their nonprofit organization, My Own Book, in the summer of 2006 to spread the joy of reading by giving away books to less fortunate children.

It all began when Kyle participated in a 4-H project to build bookshelves for the library. "In the process of organizing the project I realized literacy was an issue in our community," Kyle says. "When I was told some kids grow up never owning a book, I was shocked."

So Kyle and Brady—both Eagle Scouts—set out to do something about it. They contacted local businesses and libraries, book publishers, bookstores and supportive individuals, asking them to donate books and money.

The brothers also created a website, www.myownbook.net, organized literacy days and book readings at libraries and local elementary schools, and networked with other local literacy projects to find grant-providing organizations that could fund their cause.

"They're remarkably well organized for young men," says William Finlinson, 62, their scoutmaster at California's Solano District chapter of

the Boy Scouts of America. "They have both earned every (121) merit badge possible, the only brothers in the country to have ever managed the feat and also the youngest. They have an intense desire to improve the community. They collect eyeglasses that are then recycled to other countries and work with the rangers at Rockville Park to make it a better place for people to visit and a better habitat for wildlife."

Sally Baldwin, 45, the boys' mother, is proud of her sons. "(My husband and I) support them and offer suggestions, but they do all the work themselves," she says. "Besides, the adults in this house don't know the first thing about websites or funding grants."

The mission of My Own Book is one that the brothers both personally believe in. "I have about a billion books," Kyle says. "We'd rather read than play video games."

Last year, the Baldwin brothers received the Dale Earnhardt Legend Leadership Award, which included a \$7,000 grant, given to individuals who make a worthy contribution to their community, and a \$500 Youth Leaders for Literacy grant from the National Education Association.

But if funds run low, the brothers reach into their own pockets. "We use our own money," says Brady, who has a business with his brother selling homemade wreaths as well as eggs from chickens they raise.

The brothers have plans to take the My Own Book program nationwide. "Through the website we've helped set up chapters in New York, New Jersey and other states," Kyle says.

Barbara Mallon, coordinator of the Gifted and Talented Education programs in the West Contra Costa School District, says the Baldwin brothers have had a powerful and positive influence on Fairfield. "My Own Book has had ripple effects: the child who brought home the book (may have) inspired mom and dad to take literacy courses; the child who didn't know he or she loved to read, because the opportunity was never presented. Kyle and Brady have distributed 10,000 books and work tirelessly. Our community will never be the same."

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Story by j. poet of San Francisco.

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