

Dream Big Book Drive aims to improve literacy

Book Harvest hosts eighth-annual book drive on Martin Luther King Jr. Day

By **Natasha Townsend and Arianna Swain**, Durham Voice Staff Writers

DURHAM — Marneshia Gonzales's "Nancy Drew" books, her childhood favorites, were being boxed up at the Book Harvest Dream Big Book Drive.

Gonzales, 12, was giving books away with her mother at the eighth-annual book drive on Jan. 21, Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

"I read the same books over and over, so I like to give them away," Gonzales said. Gonzales lives in Durham, an area that Book Harvest helps the most.

Headquartered in Durham, Book Harvest is a volunteer-run organization that hosts book drives for people to donate books. The books go to schools in Durham and to children's homes to promote childhood literacy. Book Harvest's mission is to cultivate a love for reading and ensure success in school for kids of all ages.

At the Dream Big Book Drive, held in Durham Central Park, volunteers swarmed around in light green neon vests to show they were there to help. Busloads of kids and parents arrived to donate their books and to lend a helping hand. Volunteers sorted books by age group and packaged them to be sent to Durham public schools, community centers and health clinics throughout the Triangle. Dozens of organizations staffed booths as the drop-off station flooded with books. Last year, the organization collected its millionth book, said Daniele Berman, communications and events manager for Book Harvest.

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority was one of the groups collecting books. The organization hosts youth groups in the community and seeks out kids who want to give back.

"We are looking for enrichment opportunities for kids," sorority members Candace Moorer and Garisha Davis said.

Student U, an organization that works with students to develop their academic goals, distributed flyers at the event. Students begin the program before entering sixth grade and stay until they graduate college. The program yields a 100 percent high school graduation rate. Student U came to the event because its mission to



Madison Sirgany (left) and Heather Sirgany sortebooks as first-time volunteers. "It's just a great organization and our children have been introduced to books from a young age," Heather Sirgany said. Photo by: Natasha Townsend

help students achieve academic success aligns with Book Harvest's goal.

"This event is all about our big dreams for our kids and helping our kids reach their big dreams and literacy and loving books," Berman said. The event honors Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream as well as honoring kids' dreams, she said.

Dale Evarts, 66, of Durham donated 10 books. This was Evarts' first time donating to Book Harvest, but the power of books is not lost on him. He is a longtime donor to the Durham County Library.

"Reading is power," Evarts said about the importance of donating books to children. To Evarts and many of the volunteers that came out to collect, sort and pack hundreds of books in below-freezing temperatures, books are more than knowledge.

Tiara Lassiter, 29, is a licensed therapist who grew up in Durham and lives in East Durham. She heard about Book Harvest through her son's elementary school, where he was a recipient of one of Book Harvest's programs, Books on Break.

Books on Break sends kids home over the summer with 10 new books to bridge the learning gap.

Lassiter's son, Omari, 11, is in fifth grade at Parkwood Elementary School. Omari has been receiving books for four years, and he enjoys choosing the books he reads during summer breaks, his mother said.

Books are readily accessible to children

at the organization's office in Durham, and Omari trades in his books for new ones a few times throughout the school year.

When Lassiter heard of Book Harvest, she was earning a degree in social work.

"At the time I started receiving [books], I wasn't at a place where I could afford to buy all these different books for him," she said. However, she wanted more for her son.

"I wanted to make sure that other families that experience what we do also have someone advocating for them to have more books in the homes," she said.

Accessible books help children learn about their world beyond what school can teach them, Lassiter said. She has seen this effect in her son.

Omari used to not be interested in reading because he couldn't find topics he enjoyed, but now he likes to read books with characters that look like him and ones he can relate to, Lassiter said. His reading scores have increased, and math word problems don't give him trouble anymore, which his mother attributes to his voracious reading.

As Omari gets older, he can volunteer and grow in the organization, much like his mother, who is now on the board and is a member of the Parent Advisory Committee.

Together, Lassiter hopes she and her son can reach more people like them one page at a time.