

## Libraries Provide — Countywide!

### TakeOff! brings books to the youngest readers in Umatilla County

By Heather Estrada

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Long, long ago (at the turn of a new century), a special district library director had a vision that every child from birth to kindergarten would be exposed to books — lots and lots of books — and that every child would hear stories and touch books every day and begin kindergarten eager and ready to learn to read.

Out of this dream was born a program called TakeOff!

In 2002, Ken Reading, who was the Umatilla County Special Library District director at the time, had an idea after reading about the high rates of incarcerated individuals who read at only a third grade reading level. What if the UCSLD, which spans all of Umatilla County, could do something to combat that statistic? What if the district pursued the goal of reaching every child under the age of 5 with story times, putting books in their hands to take home, and educating parents so that each child would be ready to take off with reading when they entered kindergarten?

The program was modeled after a Wallowa County project called “Training Wheels,” which no longer exists.

But the one here in Umatilla County, which began as a grant-funded program in 2002, is now fully staffed and has grown exponentially over 21 years.

The program has seen four directors who increased story times, book boxes and parent education. The current TakeOff! program director is Monica Hoffman, and she has been in the role since 2014.

Hoffman previously worked as director of a local preschool and was familiar with Takeoff!. Her vision is “to reach kids who don’t have the opportunity to get to the library.” She loves that kids are excited to see her and hear the books.

Hoffman’s main role is to take a library to where the tiniest humans are. She visits private in-home childcare centers, Intermountain ESD Preschool sites, Head Start classrooms, Oregon Child Development Coalition classrooms, district libraries, YMCA childcare centers and the childcare center at Good Shepherd Medical Center.

Another goal is to educate parents on the importance of reading to their children from birth, so she attends Parent Literacy nights and Head Start programs.

She wants parents and caregivers to remember that books are consumable and that it’s more important for kids to play with them and love them (even if that means chewing on them) than it is to keep each book in pristine condition. Better to have a battered book in a kid’s hand, than a perfectly preserved book on a bookshelf.

She also warns about using books as a consequence for bad behavior (such as sitting down to read after getting in trouble). Books should be a joy

and a sweet time of bonding between parent and child.

And reading aloud doesn’t mean sitting still for half an hour — one of her goals is to reassure caregivers that it’s OK for a child to play with Legos or crawl around the room while listening to a story. She encourages the use of silly voices and other levity that brings joy to both reader and child — with no expectations or chores attached.

Hoffman and the Takeoff! program are another example of how libraries and library workers are working for a better world for each of our county residents, no matter how small that resident might be.



**Monica Hoffman brings story time and books to children all over Umatilla County as the director of TakeOff!, which helps the youngest residents prepare for kindergarten.**

**Contributed Photo**