



BRIGHT LIGHTS BOOK PROJECT NEWSLETTER

FALL EDITION: 2026

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

The Bright Lights Book Project's Mission Statement is, "To expand literacy through access to books and programs to appreciative readers of all ages." This enables book recipients to develop reader-related self-identities.

Our mission statement has become a BLBP truism. There's not a day that goes by in which I don't see this borne out. I most enjoy stocking the Palmer bookcases because it is here that I see children picking out and reading books, usually with their parents.

We have four programs: Bookcases in the Community, Bookcases in the Schools, Books to Villages, and Books to Seniors. On site, in photos, and in videos readers lay claim to books that otherwise might have ended up in landfills.

This is not happenstance. Rather, it's the end result of a great deal of hard work and a high degree of commitment on the part of BLBP board members and thirty-plus volunteers, all of whom by virtue of being avid readers, see literacy and an encompassing world view as being inextricably linked.

Thanks to all of you for your continued support. Take a moment and complete our Community Impact Survey (linked on the BLBP website). We'd like to know how we are doing.

Alys Culhane
Executive Director, Bright Lights Book Project



IMPROVING LITERACY RATES AMONG LOCAL CHILDREN REFLECTS THE BROADENING SCOPE OF THE BRIGHT LIGHTS BOOK PROJECT.

By Pete Praetorius, President

Six years ago, at the onset of the Bright Lights Book Project, the goal was to prevent quality books from being sent outside Alaska to be pulped. Although recycling is a better option than sending books to landfills, Alys argued that books that were being discarded still had a shelf life.

The first iteration of our mission statement reflected this reuse goal: "To put books into the hands of appreciative readers." When the BLBP board became cognizant of the low reading rates among Alaska school age children (Alaska is one of two states with the lowest reading proficiency rates in the nation for fourth-grade students), our focus changed from simply "rescuing books" to "upping literacy levels." Our current mission statement is reflective of this evolution: Our mission is now, "To expand literacy through access to books and programs to appreciative readers of all ages."

Placing books on free bookcases throughout the community can be seen as an indirect way of promoting literacy. Indirect, but not insignificant. Community members have repeatedly told us that they and their children are reading more because Bright Lights Book Project books are accessible. If unattended bookcases can be seen as an indirect way to promote literacy, our other efforts, such as the Summer in the Park(s) program (featured elsewhere in this newsletter) along with other efforts such as book fairs, Storytimes, and parental engagement, actively promote literacy. The BLBP will continue to incorporate both direct and indirect efforts in its quest to create more literate communities.

BLBP HAS NEW FUND DEVELOPMENT PLAN

This past summer, the BLBP board leadership worked with The Foraker Group fund development expert Megan Riebe on a fund development plan. The plan's purpose is to guide the organization's strategies in meeting fundraising goals. The BLBP's primary fundraising goal (at least currently) is to secure funding for a paid executive director and operations manager. The BLBP has reached a point where we cannot continue to do all that we do with just volunteers.

Alys is the BLBP Executive Director, but she spends nearly all of her time (as a full-time volunteer) doing a variety of tasks, the most important being volunteer coordination. Thus, the BLBP's goal is to hire an executive director who will have fundraising responsibilities. This will ensure that our organization has all fundraising systems in place to meet the organization's future financial needs.

THE BLBP AT THE ALASKA STATE FAIR

Alys Culhane

This year the Bright Lights Book Project was located in the France Equestrian Center stable area. A Fair provided banner indicated that we were the "Hitchin' Post Family Rest Stop." Here, volunteers assisted in promoting the BLBP. They also assisted in stocking the 14 theme-related newspaper boxes that we'd placed at various places on the fairgrounds.

Colton Henry, a University of Alaska Anchorage student and ardent BLBP supporter, accompanied me to the Kid's Zone Building, which during fair time houses Brad's Reptile show. On three consecutive Sunday evenings, we trekked across the Orange Lot parking lot, to where the Mat-Valley Federal Credit Union and the BLBP hosted a story time session. Our two wagons contained green Mat-Valley Credit Union bags that were filled with reptile books and books that we'd set aside for the BLBP reptile newspaper box. There we met up with Cyndy Lopez. On the first evening, she did what became routine - she kept a close eye on the star of the show, Ali Gator, a 38-year-old alligator. She then hoisted Ali Gator onto her lap and prepared to read her a book.

Colton was a huge help. On the first and subsequent nights, he rounded up young fairgoers who, entranced, sat next to Cyndy and Ali. They then listened as Cyndi read them Alligator Gumbo. After, Cindi allowed the children to touch Ali. I ran my hand across the toothy reptile's back side. Her dark green skin was surprisingly soft, like a sponge.

After the readings, Colton passed out the book bags and Cyndy answered the onlooker's questions. Me, I sat there thinking about this amazing event. It was a huge success. I mean, how many people can say that they did a story time with a real live alligator? Add to this, we were out of book bags, and the reptile newspaper box was empty.

Colton and I hauled the empty wagons back to our starting point and I got books ready for the next day's story time. BLBP volunteer Pam Hucyk had agreed to read to a rescue pig.



THE BRIGHT LIGHTS BOOK PROJECT: I MOVE BOOKS. BOOKS MOVE ME

Alys Culhane

This phrase often came to mind this summer as I moved books and books moved me.

This summer, Mat-Su School District books were at the forefront of our literacy-related efforts.

In late May, we took in books from Meadow Lakes and Big Lake Elementary Schools. Meadow Lakes Elementary and Larson Elementary both closed this year, and because Larson's library was newer, it went to Big Lake, and we got Big Lake's books.

We were then putting together the curriculum for the BLBP Summer in the Park(s) program. I, along with a staff of two, met with children four days a week, Mondays and Wednesdays at Palmer's Bugge Park and Tuesdays and Thursdays at Palmer's A-Moosement Park. A third staff member categorized the books. (Our staff were paid through a grant from the Mat-Su Health Foundation, and the Rasmuson Foundation, the City of Palmer, and the Palmer Lions Club provided additional support.)

For over two and half months, activities centered around plants, worms and composting, ants, bees and insects, dinosaurs, fossils, and bones. Later units included bubbles and Dr. Suess, balance and motion, Alaskan trains, and horse transportation.

Each day, Storytime was followed by team building and hands-on activities. Students then selected books and took them home, as we said, for their own libraries.

On Fridays, several BLBP volunteers and I gathered on the side lawn of the Palmer Visitor's Center during Friday Fling and further promoted Summer in the Park(s). We also did Storytime and hands-on activities.

Check out the Alaska Public Radio video produced by Ammon Swenson. It's on our website - www.brightlightsbookproject.org.



WHY YOU SHOULD READ TO YOUR CHILDREN!

The Child Mind Institute gives reasons on why you should read to your child

- Children who are read to daily have been exposed to at least 290,000 more words by the time they enter kindergarten than kids who aren't read to regularly.
- Reading to young children better enables them to build language skills. It exposes them to new words and ways of using language.
- Books help children build empathy and learn how to handle challenging feelings.
- Reading to children starting at a young age, even before they're able to communicate verbally, helps lay the neurological groundwork for effective language use and literacy.

Other reasons why you should read to your child

- Reading can help calm children down.
- Reading to your child can set them up for better grades in school.
- One study found that in "pre-school age children listening to stories, greater home reading exposure is positively associated with activation of brain areas supporting mental imagery and narrative comprehension" (American Academy of Pediatrics, Sept. 2015).
- "The single most important activity for building knowledge for their eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." (Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading.)

BOOKS DON'T CAUSE CAVITIES: BLBP AGAIN DISTRIBUTES BOOKS IN THE COLONY DAYS PARADE

For this year's Colony Days Parade in Palmer, the BLBP did something different. Alys and volunteers put six books each in single Ziploc bags. There was a total of 1,000 bags, which means that 6,000 books were passed out along the Palmer parade route. Many local parade participants hand out candy to kids. We had over 20 volunteers pass out the books via wagons and out of Hrimfara (Frosty Traveler's) pack saddle bags. Pete, who led Hrimmi, remarked that "unlike candy, books don't cause cavities."



SPOTLIGHT ON BOARD MEMBERS AND STAFF

RICKY MEYER:

Ricky Meyer says he joined the Board to help the Bright Lights Book Project to support efforts to foster a love of reading and advance literacy skills in the Mat-Su and all over the world. Professionally, Rick works as a senior accountant at Count On Accounting, combining a passion for community impact with expertise in Tax Accounting.

MICAH MUER

Micah Muer is a librarian at Mat-Su College. He is a fourth-generation Canadian American and a first-generation Minnesotan. He has lived in Alaska since 2011. As a new Bright Lights Book Project board member, he hopes to share neat books with people and encourage literacy.

LESLIE HARTER

Leslie Harter is our one part-time staff member. Leslie was born and raised in Alaska and has lived in Palmer for the last 13 years. Before she joined the Bright Lights Book Project, she worked for 10 years as an elementary teacher for the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District. She says that she wanted to specialize in the scientific construct of reading and earned her Reading Specialist Master's degree from the University of Alaska Southeast.

You can find her reading science fiction and fantasy novels along with creating highly decorative sugar cookies, traveling, gardening, hiking, and playing with her dogs, tending to her 18 chickens, and spending time with family and friends. Her family consists of her husband, three grown adult-children, and four pampered dogs.

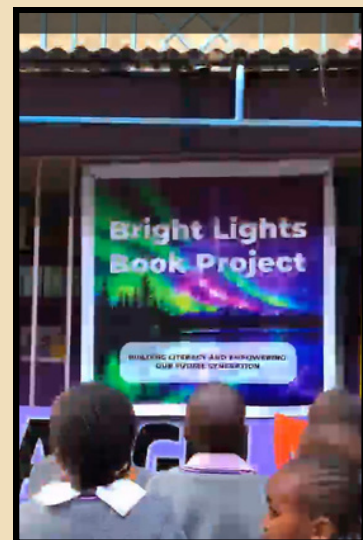


BLBP HELPS SHIP TEXTBOOKS TO KENYA

Brad Schmitz, a friend and volunteer for the BLBP, has been active for a few years in introducing Martha Abuya, a schoolteacher in Kenya, and her students to the Iditarod and to hockey. Brad raised money to send hockey equipment and old dogsled harnesses to Kenya, and in April of 2025, Martha and her students built their own dogsled from old furniture and skateboard wheels. At a demonstration for the community, Martha says that over 1,000 people showed up. The Kenyan dog team, however, were not Alaskan huskies; they laid down and panted in the heat.

Martha's daughter is about the same age as Alexi and Melissa, the subjects of the previous article, so Alys arranged for a Zoom meeting with the two youth volunteers and Martha and her daughter. It was decided at that first meeting that Alexi and Melissa would work on packaging a large number of textbooks (primarily math and science) that we had on hand but could not be placed on community bookcases (we don't textbooks on our community bookcases) so that they could be shipped to Kenya.

In total, two pallets of books were packaged up, and Carlie Trucking and TOTE Maritime provide complementary backhaul to Tacoma. From there, donations paid for a trucking company to haul the books to Texas where another company called Kentex shipped the books by ship to Kenya. Kentex discounted the charges to ship to Kenya, and Brad Schmitz was able to provide a benefactor to pay for that shipping.



NEWSPAPER BOXES FOR THE ALASKA STATE FAIR



Last spring the Mat-Su Sentinel (an online newspaper covering the Mat-Su Valley) purchased the Valley Frontiersman newspaper. The Sentinel is an online publication, so Editor Amy Buschatz had no need for the dozens of distribution boxes that once held the Frontiersman newspapers.

The BLBP was given 16 boxes, which we gave to local artists to paint. The BLBP subsequently had 12 painted newspaper boxes stocked with themed-based books at the Alaska State Fair: Distributors placed books in boxes situated at the Ekert Garden, Irwin building, Hoskins building, livestock pavilion, the Kid Zone, the Cookie Booth, the Cornucopia Ice Cream stand, and in front of Raven Hall.

ALYS AND BLBP RECOGNIZED AT GLENN MASSAY THEATER

Last spring during a Mat-Su College dance club performance, Alys was invited to come up on stage while the dancers changed their costumes. Once on stage, Sharon Peek, veteran dance instructor and head of the dance club, lauded Alys and the BLBP and then presented Alys, covered with a white sheet, a life-size image of Alys. Sharon, acknowledging how busy Alys is, said that, "Now Alys can be in two places at once." Flat Alys is now prominently displayed at our location in the former banquet room of the Eagle Hotel.



If you would like to help in our efforts, please visit our Donor Box portal on our website, or send us a check directly to our mailing address, which is PO Box 0194, Palmer, AK 99645.