

Great Falls Dispatch Local people, local stories

Home Local Interest  Great Falls teen creates charity supporting child literacy

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Samantha Grayer / donated photo

Samantha Grayer, a student at Langley High School and Great Falls resident, is the founder of Berries for Books, an organization that supports child literacy in a number of ways. We recently had a chance to meet with Samantha and her dad, Larry.

How did you get the original idea for Berries for Books?

Samantha: I made some chocolate-covered strawberries as a present for my dad for Valentine's Day, and they turned out not that bad, although they were not as pretty in the beginning as they are now. However, with practice the berries became better and better looking, so much so that I ended selling a few boxes here and there to friends. By the end of the summer, I realized that I could make something out of it and actually do something productive with making the strawberries. That's how I got the idea to start a nonprofit.

How did it occur to you to tie books and literacy promotion with the project?
How did you become aware of the need?

Samantha: English has always been my favorite subject. I love reading; reading and writing are by far my favorite things. Literacy, particularly child literacy, is something I really feel strongly about. I was aware that literacy is a worldwide problem, and after doing some research, I realized that we could actually make a difference close to home. We decided on [District of Columbia] Ward 8 because of the critical need there.

You have a book drive currently in process that ends on August 12.

Larry: Yes, we planned it to end before school started so that their initial school, [Alfred Kiger Savoy Elementary School](#), would have the books ready to use. But I think from Samantha's perspective, this is going to be so much more rewarding, because she was invited to the school's Book Fair, and will actually be able to hand out books to the students. We're going to have enough books [as a result of the drive] for one or two maybe more books per student. For Samantha to actually be able to hand the books to students, I think for her will be so rewarding, and she'll be able to see the true positive impact that she has from doing the charitable work, and the outcome.

How many book drives might you wish to hold in a year?

Samantha: I honestly don't know. I think an annual summer book drive would definitely be possible during the year. I think there's also other things that we'd like to do with a charity such as this, like a tutoring program. For elementary school, we could offer those students [a program] that can be run by high schoolers like me. It's not set in stone yet, but that's definitely something I'd like to go into while the school year is going. Then the book drive—also with the strawberries—making those strawberries could be something that happens in the summer.

What about you? Plans for college? Major? Career? How far ahead do you plan?

Samantha: Right before this, I actually just got off the phone with a Harvard professor. I was talking to him about, asking questions about, what I need to do now in order to prepare for college. So, I'm definitely starting to think about college right now. I'd really like to go into law. That's something I'm interested in and something I think I would really enjoy doing.

I was going to ask, what do you do during your summers, but I think the question may have already been answered, for this summer at least.

Samantha: Well, actually the past three days, I've been at a yearbook camp. I'm an editor for my yearbook. So that's fun. Yeah, I play soccer. Right now, we've had a little bit of a break so it has been on and off this summer. I played for my high school team and also a traveling team.

Is there anything else you would like the public to know about Berries for Books?

Samantha: I think our main point is getting the publicity out about the drive and to advertise our website. There are different ways people can donate. We have an Amazon Wishlist, we have drop off locations for book donations, and we even pick up donations from people's homes.

We learned that Berries for Books reached out to Savoy Elementary School's librarian to see if she had ideas for a list of books that her school's students would enjoy reading. The librarian's response was *Do I?*, and she immediately produced a comprehensive list, which is the basis for the Amazon Wishlist.

The school also pointed out that it has experienced additional challenges because of Covid. Students not having their normal interactions with their teachers caused some children to have setbacks in their reading. Having fresh books for young readers is especially important—and welcome—at this time, according to the school.

To learn more about the ways in which the public can support the year-round work of Berries for Books, visit the organization's website, berriesforbooks.org. To see the librarian-curated list of desired books, visit the organization's [Amazon Wishlist](#).



Berries for Books / donated photo

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