

# Great Falls student's literacy initiative combines books . . . and berries!

August 2, 2022

- by BRIAN TROMPETER, Sun Gazette Newspapers



Samantha Grayer, a rising Langley High School sophomore, founded non-profit Berries for Books to bolster literacy at a Washington, D.C., elementary school. (Family photo)

Helping students learn to read is gratifying and getting tasty treats as a reward makes it all the sweeter.

Samantha Grayer, 15, of Great Falls is a rising Langley High School sophomore who last December founded "Berries for Books," a non-profit that is holding a book drive this summer to bolster child literacy at a District of Columbia school.

The book drive began July 20 and runs through Friday, Aug. 12. Donated books will benefit students at Savoy Elementary School, which Grayer selected because of its 11-percent reading-proficiency rate – a figure recorded before the pandemic interrupted schooling. The District’s Ward 8, where the school is located, also has twice as much poverty and unemployment than the rest of the city, she said.

The idea for the non-profit germinated from a family celebration. Grayer last year made chocolate-covered strawberries for her father’s birthday (“They surprisingly turned out not too terrible,” she said) and last summer refined the treats’ appearance and began selling them to her friends.

“After a while, I realized I could actually put it to good use,” she said of her treat-making. “Growing up, my parents have always taught me that giving back to the community is such an important thing.”

Grayer, the organization’s president and board chairman, started the non-profit in December 2021 at age 14. She even got her parents into the act: Laurence Grayer is the non-profit’s vice president and Jacquelyn Grayer its secretary.

Setting up the non-profit and its Website was “pretty confusing at first,” she said, citing paperwork and legal terms unfamiliar to her. Her father helped her navigate the Website and requisite forms.

Berries for Books in the first week of its donation effort received about 100 books, or 10 percent of its goal.

While Grayer has not met any of the students her non-profit will be helping, she has been in contact with the school’s librarian, who suggested which books to place on the initiative’s Amazon Wish List.

“We received a rather long list of books that the librarian specifically believed, knowing the students, would be the most beneficial,” Grayer’s father said.

The group is seeking new or gently used books suitable for children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. According to the librarian’s wishes, on-fiction books should have a copyright no earlier than 2019; fiction books should be “appropriate and politically correct.”

Donors may drop off books at Huntington Learning Center, 366 Elden St. in Herndon; Thelo Greek, 10123 Colvin Run Road in Great Falls; or Great Dogs, 9859 Walker Road in Great Falls. Those who wish to donate books also may schedule a collection time with the non-profit or order books from the group's Amazon Wish List.

Grayer makes chocolate-covered strawberries and gives them to donors to thank them for giving books. The fruity desserts come in a wide array of different chocolates and toppings such as sprinkles, nuts, gumdrops and large sugar grains. Donors typically receive a dozen or two strawberries, depending on the size of their gifts.

Grayer's parents so far have given funds to buy the strawberries and toppings, so as to ensure all donations to the group benefit the school. The organization also has two board members: Baltimore resident Karen Singer, who has charity and non-profit experience, and Stephanie Will, who was Grayer's fourth-grade teacher and contributes her educational experience.

Singer said she has been helping Grayer understand logistical and publicity elements of the non-profit enterprise and professionalize its proceedings with formal meetings. Online conversations also have allowed for effective brainstorming, she said.

Grayer has been impressive in her efforts and has a supportive family behind her, Singer said.

"Samantha is pretty dynamic," she said. "She is very thoughtful, a strong student and athlete, and is really committed and self-motivated. She's going to go far in this world."

Grayer spent the first five years of her life in Silver Spring and has lived in Great Falls ever since. She attended Great Falls Elementary and Cooper Middle schools before going to Langley High.

She plays on soccer on the Great Falls-Reston travel team and her high school's squad and alternates between goalie and center defense. Grayer's father said she also loves English, hence her interest in child literacy. She won Gold Key honors from the Regional Scholastic Writing Awards competition in 2021 and 2022 with opinion pieces on the so-called "gay panic" legal defense and Confederate monuments.

Grayer is thinking of starting an after-school tutoring program through Langley High School. She already performed that task in middle school by aiding her peers with their writing and now hopes to benefit elementary-school students as well.

Despite the effort involved, Grayer said she hopes to continue efforts with Berries for Books next year.

“For a lot of people my age, running a non-profit book drive is not really what their summer consists of,” she said. “It’s been a little hard seeing people my age and my friends be able to do things they like while I’m spending time putting effort toward the non-profit. But I’ve learned that taking time aside to do something that doesn’t directly benefit me has become important to me.”

For more information and a link to the Amazon Wish List, visit [berriesforbooks.org](https://berriesforbooks.org) or e-mail [contact@berriesforbooks.org](mailto:contact@berriesforbooks.org).

[https://www.insidenova.com/news/fairfax/great-falls-students-literacy-initiative-combines-books-and-berries/article\\_89550abc-11d2-11ed-a12d-53a6dbe432d5.html](https://www.insidenova.com/news/fairfax/great-falls-students-literacy-initiative-combines-books-and-berries/article_89550abc-11d2-11ed-a12d-53a6dbe432d5.html)