

PARTING Thoughts

BY WINNIE SANDLER GRINSPOON

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Inspiration for great ideas often comes from unexpected places. PJ Library is no exception.

The creator of this unique Jewish children’s book program was inspired by a country-music legend – the one and only Dolly Parton.

It was back in 2005. My father-in-law, Harold Grinspoon, heard Dolly interviewed on the radio discussing the book-gifting program she had developed, called Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Dolly spoke of her dream that all children grow up in homes full of books. She wanted to fortify the next generation with a love of reading. She was determined to build literacy.

At the same time, Harold was looking for ways to build Jewish literacy. He was witnessing a lack of connection to the values, stories, and traditions that have been at the center of the Jewish experience for millennia. How could our community share the joys of Jewish life with young people in a way that would resonate?

As Dolly spoke about her Imagination Library, an idea began to take shape.

Dolly explained that she had started her program by sending one book each month to children ages 0-5 living in Sevier County, Tennessee, her childhood home. Over time, she found partners to help bring the program to children in other communities. Dolly’s Imagination Library team handled the book sourcing and distribution, and local partners helped raise the funds needed to get books to children beyond east Tennessee. In time, the program grew into a global juggernaut distributing free monthly books to children in the US, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking countries.



Winnie Sandler Grinspoon thanked Dolly Parton in person for her inspiration.

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One day, Harold called me with an idea. “We should create a Jewish version of Imagination Library,” he said. He had seen his grandchildren’s delight when they received Jewish children’s books. With Dolly’s program as the model, we would source beautiful storybooks each month, distribute them directly to children’s homes, and find partners to join us. That was the moment PJ Library was born.

A few summers ago, we had the opportunity to meet Dolly personally and thank her for her inspiration. She couldn’t have been more gracious. We were there to thank her, and yet she was thanking us in return. It was a moment to celebrate our shared mission to fill homes with books and the power of stories.

As PJ Library marks its 18th birthday, I think back to Dolly’s inspiration and all that has transpired since. Thanks to Dolly’s example and to the many donors who give generously to PJ Library, we have gifted more than 50 million books to date. PJ Library now offers books for children from infancy through the tween years, stories in seven languages, podcasts, holiday guides, and more. And our story is still evolving. I look forward to the new chapters we’ll write over the next 18 years. ■

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