

Q&A with Dolly Parton

On the occasion of PJ Library's 18th birthday, we had the chance to speak with music legend Dolly Parton!

PJ Library: What inspired you to start Dolly Parton's Imagination Library? Did you ever foresee it becoming as successful as it is today — even inspiring others (like Harold Grinspoon!) to follow in your footsteps and start their own programs?

Dolly Parton: Well, I'm always honored when my Imagination Library inspires others, like Harold Grinspoon and PJ Library. That is so very special to me — especially because the Imagination Library comes from a very personal place for me.

My daddy didn't get a chance to learn to read or write, and that was so hard for him. He was one of the wisest men I have ever known, but his inability to read kept him from fulfilling all his dreams. Inspiring kids to love books and reading early in life became a passion for me. I got the idea to start a program where we give books to children once a month from the time they're born until they start school — and that's how the Imagination Library got its start!

When we began back in 1995, we were just planning to send books to children in my home county in Tennessee. But word got out, and people wanted the program in their communities too. Now we gift a book each month to one out of every eight children under 5 in the US and are operating around the world.

My dad got to live long enough to see the program doing really well. In fact, before he passed away, my dad told me that he was more proud of me for the Imagination Library than anything I had ever done. I can't tell you how much that means to me to this day.

PJ Library: We love keeping up with the Imagination Library and its many accomplishments! In 2023, you celebrated the incredible milestone of gifting 200 million books to children. PJ Library is also celebrating: Last year we sent our 50 millionth book, and this year is our 18th birthday. What is most important to you about continuing to do this work?

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Dolly Parton's Imagination Library reaches one out of eight children under age 5 in the US.

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Dolly Parton: First of all, congratulations, PJ Library! I'm thrilled to celebrate milestones with you! Of course, I am very, very proud of how far we've come with the Imagination Library. We were thrilled to celebrate our 100 millionth book in 2018, and here we are just five years later celebrating 200 million books worldwide. Isn't that amazing?

It's a big effort, and it takes many committed people to make programs like these happen. But it's worth it all because we are reaching so many children and families. I am honored to get to help inspire a love of reading in children. They truly are our future.

PJ Library: PJ Library and the Imagination Library both rely on funding partners who help bring the program to communities around the world. What's the significance of having partners who support and believe in this work?

Dolly Parton: I'm a big believer in putting my money where my heart is, but it's impossible to do this work alone. I often get a lot of credit, but the real heroes of our story are the thousands of local partners who have embraced this dream and made it their own. They support this work out of our shared passion to make sure kids in their communities have every opportunity to learn and grow and succeed, and there really is no greater compliment than that! 📖

