West of 105 Degrees Longitude – A Book Arts Rendezvous

North Idaho College, first-graders, automobiles, and college wrestlers might seem like a strange combination of subjects, except when used to describe the Shirley Parker Reading Program, established in Coeur d’Alene to encourage reading as a life skill for local first-grade students. Established by the North Idaho College wrestling program in partnership with local auto dealership Parker Toyota in honor of owner Doug Parker’s late wife Shirley, the program brings NIC’s champion wrestling team into first-grade classrooms throughout the Coeur d’Alene School District as mentors to promote reading.

Through this unique partnership, literally hundreds of children are encouraged to get excited about books and reading each year.

A lady’s love for reading – and wrestling

Shirley Parker believed in reading and the knowledge and inspiration books could bring to people of all ages. She was an active member of the Coeur d’Alene community and was instrumental in the establishment of the Hayden Library in North Idaho. A community servant, a wife, a mother, and a true lady, Shirley was a gentle woman until the set foot in the NIC gym to cheer on the young men on the wrestling mat. The Parker’s son Jim, now the president of Parker Toyota since Doug’s retirement, was a wrestler and the family has always enjoyed the sport. The Parkers have supported NIC wrestling for years and have seen the faces of wrestlers and coaches change through more than thirty seasons as followers of the Cardinal wrestling dynasty.

"Shirley was a huge supporter as well as a huge fan of NIC wrestling," said Pat Whitcomb, head coach of NIC’s thirteen-time National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) national champions wrestling team and a former NIC wrestler himself. The reading program was established by the NIC wrestling program in 2000 as a way for the athletes to give back to the community. After Shirley’s death in 2002, the team decided to pay tribute to her and keep her memory alive by naming the reading program in her honor.

"NIC athletics is heavily focused on academics and community service in addition to the sport, so this program means a lot to us as a team," Whitcomb said. "It seemed fitting to honor a cherished wrestling fan by naming the program after her. A program focused on one of her greatest passions – reading.

Getting excited about books

The North Idaho College wrestling team holds a fundrais- er at the end of its preseason to support the program. The players collect pledges toward their completion of a mountain climb in Hope, Idaho, typically raising approximately $1,000 that goes toward the purchase of books for every first-grader in the Coeur d’Alene School District.

Each week during the season, NIC wrestlers and coaches visit a local elementary school to read to the first-graders. The children are encouraged to take their book home to continue practicing their reading skills in addition to receiving a bookmark and poster of the wrestling team.

"It’s important that the program doesn’t stop when we walk out the door," Whitcomb said. "We want them to continue the reading experience."

Last year the Shirley Parker Reading Program benefited nearly 700 students, including all first-graders from the Coeur d’Alene School District’s ten elementary schools. "It’s really fun to hang out with the kids, especially when they’re so excited to hang out with you," said NIC wrestler Kyle Frawley, who has been reading to the kids through the program since he enrolled at NIC in 2002.

The wrestlers always make time to visit with the kids after reading and have even been known to sign a few autographs on the kids’ books or on the wrestling team’s posters or programs. The wrestlers play with the children during recess after the reading session to not only bond with the children, but to encourage fitness as well.

This year, the wrestling team visited several elementary schools during drug awareness week to talk about the effects of drug use on athletic performance and to encourage kids to be drug free.

The children really look up to the wrestlers. Literally.

First-grade teachers love to watch the kids on the kids’ faces when the team of champion wrestlers walks into the classroom.

Ranging from 125 to 200 pounds, the NIC wrestlers demand attention just by their presence.

Although there are always a few kids disappointed when Hulk Hogan or their other favorite professional wrestlers don’t walk through the door, most of the children’s eyes widen at the site and celebrity-like status of the wrestling team.
"It’s priceless to see these big guys sitting in those little chairs in front of a floor full of kids, really connecting with them," Whitcomb said. "I truly believe they are making a difference in the lives of these kids."

Softening the hearts of both big and small

Somehow, as the North Idaho College student-athletes come to discover, community service tends to receive so much gratification from giving to others that it far outweighs the effort they put in.

Shirley Parker believed it and so is the case for the NIC wrestlers who present the children with story time and books. The satisfaction of making a difference in a child's life makes them feel like the winners.

"The program really does two things," Doug Parker said. "The first is obvious in the benefits it brings to the kids through that community service, but it also shows the community that there's a lot more to these wrestlers than meets the eye. They're out there working in their communities and making a real contribution outside of sports or NIC."

Frawley, who moved to the area from Tacoma when he enrolled at NIC, said he had done some community service back home, but had never had the chance to work one on one with kids before.

Oddly enough the prospect of working with dozens of the pint-sized first-graders seemed an intimidating thought at first to many of the wrestlers, but Frawley said he is glad to have had the opportunity to work with the kids in the elementary schools and help them the importance of reading to both their educations and their lives.

"These kids don't really have anyone else to look up to, to play with them or read to them," Frawley said. "It's a positive experience for everyone involved."

Everyone from the kids, to the coaches, to the players and teachers as well as those who see Shirley Parker's memory live on within the young faces of the children inspired through this program.

"We're really out there to make a difference in these kids' lives," Frawley said. "But I think we enjoy it as much as the kids do."

Reading program receives regional recognition

The Shirley Parker Reading Program received national attention when the Parker Toyota dealership and the NIC wrestling team were featured in the July 2003 issue of Time Magazine for their work with area first-graders.

Parker Toyota was honored for the 17th consecutive year as a recipient of the Toyota President's Award, which is given for excellence in all aspects of dealership operations. The ad space in Time Magazine was provided by Toyota to feature the award-winning dealerships, and Parker Toyota decided to profile one of its most rewarding service partnerships, the Shirley Parker Reading Program, in front of thousands of educators in the regionalized Pacific Northwest issue.

Writing bug hits wrestling coach

Whether or not it was the kids or the "writing bug" that inspired him to fulfill his life's ambition to write a book, Whitcomb accomplished his goal last year when he published his first book. It was a dream that took over a decade to reach.

Whitcomb was once a high school economics teacher and to fill time while on summer vacation of his first year of teaching in Kingston, Idaho, in 1990, Whitcomb began writing a story about three college friends who reunite annually to play golf and reminisce. He continued to work on the book for eight years, sometimes writing all night, other times not writing for months.

When it was finished, he shared it with his wife Jan, whom he met while the two were attending North Idaho College and with whom he now shares four children. Jan read it, loved it. Then she shared it with the members of her book club who also enjoyed it and decided to encourage Whitcomb to publish it.


"The book is doing very well," Whitcomb said. "It feels good to have seen the project to completion."

A seed planted benefits all involved

Long after the death of Shirley Parker, the reading program named in her honor is reaping valuable rewards for all the parties involved in it: children excited about reading, a coach realizing his dream of being a published author, a young team of wrestlers who are better people because of the gratification they've received, knowing they were able to touch the life of a child.

In this unlikely mix of characters, books were the component that helped create the synergy of the Shirley Parker Reading Program, making the individuals involved in it the real champions.

West of 105 Degrees Longitude — continued from page 1

We were delighted to have a judge of quality and reputation in Madelyn Garrett, who selected artists from eight states, who met standards of professionalism and conceptual accomplishment in this overview of contemporary artist's books.

They arrived packaged with care, wrapped and re-wrapped in tissue paper or cushioned by Styrofoam peanuts. Typed and hand-addressed labels were attached to brown, corrugated boxes or recycled, padded envelopes. Whispering, pale pages offered a look into a region of book artists.

Forty-two books were selected and displayed in the Traditions Gallery at Idaho State University, and later at the second venue, the Sport Gallery at BYU-Idaho. Megan conceived the "book buffet" display area, where small books could be featured upon in a cozy counter style presentation. She also created the phrases, "An Unfolding Encounter," "A Stream of Dialogue," and "A Hand Held Utterance" on book pages to connect the wall areas to the work and the viewer.

"The physical presence of books is often understated. The wall text, letters on fluttering book pages, was intended to act as a linear link, a trail of breadcrumbs, to pull the viewers into and through the gallery. Additionally, we wanted to encourage consumption of the work. Turning pages is necessary for the proper digestion of artist's books," Megan observes. "Viewers of art are conditioned to look and not touch. The book buffet indulged the viewers' impulsion for tactile manipulation."

A Note From the Curator — continued from page 1

of a larger, integrated entity, as the substance and personality of the exhibition itself emerged. It was my privilege to be part of a process that once again brought to the fore the important question of "What is a book?" This exhibition challenged all conventional answers to that question. I hope it also raised many more questions. What are the relationships between form and content? How important are design and craftsmanship and can you have one without the other? These and similar queries allow viewers and bookmakers alike to rediscover the amazing adaptability and endurance of the book.

"West of 105" was an important exhibition. It showed off traditional letterpress printing, thoughtful typography, intuitive illustration, and imaginative artists' books painstakingly produced. Ultimately each book was a testament to the far-sightedness that looking West inspires."