Received:
30/09/2026
Accepted:
06/10/2026

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00097683

Obituary

Dolly Parton

1946 - 2026

Helena Barrett-Duncan

Inspired by her father's inability to read or write, Dolly had a dream to bring the joy of books to children. As a child she loved books, but also realised the power of reading, stories, and dreams. Dolly would say, 'If you can read, you can do anything, dream anything and be anything'.

And so, in 1995 Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was born with a simple yet profound idea. Gift a book to all children in a community every month from birth to their fifth birthday to inspire a love of reading and give every child the best start in life.

For Dolly, who had travelled to Nashville to pursue her country music dreams, this was about more than just books. It was an opportunity to support children in making their own dreams come true.

Initially, the Imagination Library was only ever designed for Dolly's hometown of Sevier County, Tennessee. But as neighbouring towns, counties and states heard of the programme and requested to join, the programme grew, and so did Dolly's dream. The Dollywood Foundation's mission became clear. Support any community, large or small, near or far, to bring the love and joy of books to more children.

After a request to bring the Imagination Library to Yorkshire, Dolly travelled to the UK in 2008 to launch The Dollywood Foundation UK and bring her offer of support to any community across the UK wanting to start an Imagination Library for their children. From one community and a few hundred children, the programme grew organically across England and subsequently expanded into Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

In 2011 the Scottish Government, through a grant to Scottish Book Trust, made the Imagination Library books available to every looked after child

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
ISSN 2976-9353 (Online)
Published by celcis.org

from birth to age five in Scotland. Eligibility grew so that any child, no matter their looked after arrangement (kinship, foster, adoption, residential care), could receive the books, and also remain in the programme regardless of changes to their circumstances. In 2026 The Why Not Trust joined the partnership so that the children of care experienced parents were also included in the scheme.

The impact of gifting the Imagination Library books to children with care experience is far-reaching, supporting early childhood development outcomes and early literacy skills. The biggest impact, however, has always been on relationships, supporting children to build safe and trusting bonds with their carers whilst sharing stories together. The monthly book arrival remains a constant to children living turbulent lives, providing them with a layer of consistent routine and comfort. We often hear stories of children arriving to new foster placements or forever homes with nothing but a bag of books from Dolly.

As we mourn the loss of our founding president Dolly Parton, we celebrate the 16,311 care experienced children across Scotland who have been part of the programme over the past 15 years, receiving over 380,000 books. We are part of a global network who have collectively delivered over 320 million books worldwide. We thank our 300 partners across Scotland and the rest of the UK whose tireless efforts bring the joy of reading to around 100,000 children every month.

The Dollywood Foundation UK has been built for the future, and, as the custodians of Dolly’s dream, we are as emboldened as ever to continue to bring the joy of books to more communities and children across the UK and Ireland.

Dolly would always say that our local programme partners are the heroes of the programme. To all those who support Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, we thank you.

To all children everywhere, Dolly leaves you with a simple message, to live your dreams and that ‘I will always love you’.

About the author

Helena Barrett-Duncan is the Scotland regional director for The Dollywood Foundation UK, home of Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Before joining the Dollywood Foundation, she championed Dolly Parton’s Imagination

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
ISSN 2976-9353 (Online)
Published by celcis.org

Library through her role as community engagement manager (early years) at Scottish Book Trust. Helena has worked for several charities and arts organisations focused on early years, community development, and access to creative arts.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
ISSN 2976-9353 (Online)
Published by celcis.org