



## BILL ROSENDAHL PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

for Contributions to the Public Good

# A LEADER IN *Literacy*

BY LISA  
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DOLLY PARTON IS KNOWN FOR HER MUSIC, BUT SHE IS ALSO AN ADVOCATE FOR READING, EARNING HER THE BILL ROSENDAHL PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD



**D**olly Parton is famous around the globe as the big-haired, larger-than-life singer, songwriter, businesswoman and actress, but to many young children she is known simply as “The Book Lady.”

The Queen of Country Music is also the founder of the Imagination Library, an organization that mails more than 1 million free books to preschool kids each month to help foster a love of reading. Launched in 1995 in her home state of Tennessee, it is now the largest children’s literacy organization in the world.

Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club is honoring Parton with the Bill Rosendahl Public Service Award for Contributions to Civic Life. It recognizes her work with the Imagination Library, which this year celebrated a milestone of having donated 100 million books over its history.

Each child enrolled in the Imagination Library receives a new book addressed to him or her each month, from the time they are born until they are ready to start kindergarten.

Parton, an author and avid reader, has said she hopes the books help prepare children for an education and encourage them to imagine what is possible.

“I dream that every child in the world will have the opportunity to make their dreams come true,” Parton wrote in her 2012 book *Dream More*.

The fourth of 12 children, Parton said

books helped open her world when she was growing up in rural Locust Ridge, Tenn., in a tiny cabin with no electricity or running water. Her mother, Avie Lee Parton, read the Bible to her children to entertain them, and the stories of the Old Testament captivated Parton.

The singer started the Imagination Library as a tribute to her father, Robert Lee Parton. Like many men of his era, he went without schooling to help support his family and never learned to read or write. Parton has said her father was the smartest man she has ever known, but she suspects his lack of literacy kept him from fulfilling all his dreams.

The Imagination Library began in Parton’s native Sevier County, Tenn., in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. While many equated “poor” children with “dumb,” Parton saw that often kids from underprivileged families simply weren’t exposed to reading at home, putting them at a disadvantage when they started school.

“The real truth was that education wasn’t about being rich or poor. It was simply that some parents had done much more than others to get their kids prepared,” she wrote in *Dream More*.

“When I thought about my Mama reading the Bible to us,” she added, “it hit me that if kids had books in the home, just maybe somebody would read to them and help them love books. Even more important, maybe it would inspire them and



Shawn Miller



Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden (pictured in photo at left) and Dolly Parton unveil "Coat of Many Colors," the 100 millionth book donated by Parton's nonprofit Imagination Library, during a ceremony in the Great Hall, February 27, 2018.



spark in them the kind of wild imagination that I have so they will thirst for what's out there in the big world."

The initial plan envisioned the library as a local effort, but it later expanded across the United States and into Canada, Britain and Australia. In February, the program's 100 millionth book was dedicated to the Library of Congress. "This is an extraordinary gift to humankind," Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden said of the initiative.

As a child, Parton's biggest dream was to perform on stage at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, a goal she accomplished in 1959

at age 13 when she sang with her uncle Bill Owens. In 1967, she released her debut album "Hello, I'm Dolly."

Parton has become the most honored female country music performer of all time. She has composed more than 3,000 songs including "I Will Always Love You," which became a hit for Parton and later for Whitney Houston, and sold more than 100 million albums worldwide.

Parton has won eight Grammys and in 2011 received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Twenty-five of her songs have reached No. 1 on the Billboard Country Music Charts.



# PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD DOLLY PARTON

The fourth of 12 children, Dolly is standing in front of her father. Dolly, below, circa 1955.



She also starred on the big screen as a secretary in the workplace comedy *9 to 5*, in which three women seek revenge on their male boss, and received an Academy Award nomination for writing the movie's theme song.

A successful businesswoman, Parton launched the Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., in 1986 and turned the small town into a tourist destination that supports thousands of jobs.

She still lives in Tennessee, along with her husband, Carl Dean. They have been married for 52 years.

The Imagination Library is just one of many philanthropic efforts by Parton, who helps causes through her Dollywood Foundation, which encourages people to "Dream more, learn more, care more and be more." In 2016,

she hosted a telethon that raised about \$9 million to help people affected by wildfires around Gatlinburg, Tenn. The money was used to give \$10,000 each to nearly 900 families displaced by the fires.

Now 72, Parton continues to write and perform and remains active in her business and philanthropic ventures. She has said she will never retire.

Earlier this month, Parton announced she had joined with Warner Bros. Television to produce a television series that will appear on Netflix in 2019. Each episode will be based on one of Parton's songs, and the singer will appear on camera in some episodes. She also is composing music for an upcoming movie called *Dumplin'*, the story of a plus-sized teenager who enters a local beauty pageant run by her mother, who is played by Jennifer Aniston.

In addition, Parton has said in recent interviews that she is preparing to reunite with co-stars Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin for a *9 to 5* sequel, prompted in part by the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and abuse.

Parton acknowledges that part of what made her famous was her over-the-top style featuring high heels, rhinestones and big blonde hair. In *Dream More*, she described her look as "a blend of Mother Goose, Cinderella and the local hooker."

But she added that she hopes her work to promote early childhood literacy will outshine her glittering wardrobe and bright makeup.

"If I am remembered 100 years from now," she wrote, "I hope it will be not for looks but for books." 📖

