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## Ginnie Graham: One in five Tulsa County kids read books in library's summer program

By Ginnie Graham News Columnist Sep 23, 2017 Updated Sep 23, 2017 1





It was just another sibling argument to break up, but my daughter was right on this one.

There is nothing unfair about her getting an extra \$6 for the Tulsa State Fair. She earned it by completing the Tulsa City-County Library's summer reading program, and free gate admission is in the prize coupon book.

"But I read books in the summer. You saw me," he said.

"You didn't turn any of it in, so it doesn't count," she said.

My son is not alone; my husband is left to pay his way, too. I filled out a summer book log and received an admission coupon — and a few other nice treats like a Merritt's Bakery breakfast pastry and Krispy Kreme doughnut.

After hitting a [30-year low in participation two years ago](#) and making [strides last year](#) to reverse the downturn, library officials are celebrating big leaps in numbers.

Results from the summer reading program show a 4 percent increase in people signing up and 51 percent more finishing the program, compared to the previous year.

That's particularly impressive considering this was a 10-week program, as opposed to 14 weeks last summer.

In Tulsa County, one in five children and teens participated in the reading program. It narrows to one in three children among infants to 9-year-olds.

A total of 52,855 children, teens and adults participated. Of those, 26,843 completed the program, reading a total of 371,340 books. Among children, 91 percent choose to read 12 more books for a bonus prize.

That's quite a literate community.

**Coming together to support the library:** Compared to library systems of similar size, Tulsa has one of the strongest summer reading programs, based on a presentation to the library oversight commission on Thursday.

Participation in Oklahoma City's library system was 22,596, the Kansas City library system was 18,682 and the Pittsburg library reported 16,736 participants.

Chief Executive Officer Kim Johnson, [who has led the library since November](#), gives credit to everyone around her — elected officials issuing challenges, businesses donating in-kind items for coupons, the Tulsa Library Trust funding the program and the librarians and teen volunteers administering the program.

"We have one of the best summer reading programs in the country," Johnson said. "We're one of the few, if not only library systems, with a coupon book of prizes as well as a medal. Our kids really do look forward to those medals. With the prizes, there really is a reward for reading."

Johnson mentions this because surveys show about 35 percent came to the program for the prizes. About 24 percent were seeking educational activities and 23 percent wanted affordability — everything is free.

For 18 percent, they returned because they did it last year. It's a summer tradition.

Those medals are part of the tradition. My kids add their medals to a single strand with beads. Those have more staying power than the inflatable prizes that end up as weapons and get torn.

Coupons come from local businesses, and additional prizes are given away in drawings. Throughout the summer, libraries hold events such as magicians, singers, dancers, artists, authors and other entertainers.

It's paid for by the Tulsa Library Trust, so none of it comes from taxes. This year, the trust donated about \$186,000 for the program, covering performers, prizes and printing costs.

"It really is the community coming together to support the library," Johnson said.

**One of life's real pleasures:** [A slew of elected officials threw out some friendly challenges](#), including Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum to fellow community leaders. Mayors of Broken Arrow, Skiatook and

Collinsville took him up on it.



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Skiatook was named the winner with 33.93 percent of children and youth participating, edging out Collinsville's 33.51 percent. Broken Arrow finished with 24.6 percent of children and teens involved, and nearly 20 percent of the city of Tulsa's kids joined the program.

Skiatook will be getting a plaque next week and bragging rights for a year.

Tulsa City Councilor Vanessa Hall-Harper encouraged students in her District 1 to sign up by at least 5 percent higher than last year. They ended up with a 6 percent increase, and Hall-Harper hosted a community barbecue.

For dessert, [Hall-Harper let some children throw a few pies](#) at her as a fun reading reward.

"Anytime you have support at home or in the community, it is a model for kids," Johnson said. "It goes a long way."

Adults are the ones who helped push the numbers up, increasing participation by about 48 percent with 13,363 adults signing up.

The 396 teen volunteers got a shout-out for that uptick from youth services department manager Suanne Wymer.

“They really pushed the adult program, presenting it as a statement instead of a question when parents came with children — ‘Here is the adult reading program for you to do, too,’” Wymer said.

In the final four weeks, the other Tulsa city councilors jumped on board to set a goal of signing up at least 100 more children and youth. All met that goal, and Anna America’s District 7 led that last blast with 879 kids joining.

America said she would like to see even more people participate next year.

“I did this with my kids every year when they were younger, and I think it’s part of why they both enjoy reading now,” America said. “We know that encouraging kids to enjoy reading is one of the easiest and best ways to help them be more successful in school. Plus, it’s one of life’s real pleasures.”



### News Columnist Ginnie Graham

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### (1) comment



**Andy Williams** Sep 23, 2017 5:12pm

Our 3 youngest grandkids of which we are guardians are and have been in this program for a long time. My wife makes them read. 👍

Welcome to the discussion.