

First Mission Accomplished and More to Do for Children and Their Families in the greater Big Ugly, West Virginia Area

As a popular saying goes “Be careful what you ask for because you just might get it” Three years ago, Shari Gullo and her husband Vince, tireless volunteers from Lake Zurich, found themselves asking for new and used books for underserved families in the Big Ugly, West Virginia area **and ultimately, they collected 50,000.** The Gullos youngest son had played college baseball in the Ohio Valley Conference, so Shari and her husband had traveled all over the Ohio Valley to watch him play. Repeatedly driving through Appalachia, they were struck by the poverty. This was the seed for the “**Big Ugly Book Drive**”

The Big Ugly, West Virginia area is real.

Situated south of Route 64, and accessible by roads many would not consider driving on, the Big Ugly area has a Community Center run by an organization called **Step by Step** (www.stepbystepWV.org) founded by Harvard graduate, Michael Tierney who grew up in the Chicago area. For more than twenty-five years,

Step by Step has ensured that disadvantaged children living in economically-challenged communities throughout the



southern coalfields of West Virginia receive continuous, comprehensive care from birth to independent adulthood. From its early days as a writing group for children in foster care, Step by Step has evolved into a regional, grassroots 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization dedicated to supporting children and families



as they learn to “dream, work, and grow” together. Whether at the community center, in afterschool and summer programs, or as part of the center’s home visits, at-risk children and their families have access to free education services, healthcare, economic support, and a variety of training opportunities.

What is also real are the living conditions for many in West Virginia. This beautiful tree-filled state nestled in the Appalachian Mountains has been hardest hit by the opioid crisis with overdose deaths quadrupling since 2010. West Virginia spends more than double than any other state on opioid related problems and is home to 14 of the 30 counties in the nation with the highest per-capita opioid-related costs. It also has the highest rate of substandard housing in the country, and suffers deeply as a result of impact on the coal industry, unemployment and poverty. Over one-half of children living in the area are below the poverty level and have food insecurity. Many households have no children’s books, no internet or other learning tools making young lives more vulnerable with limited access to resources. 35% of West Virginia households do not have a computer 41% do not have broadband internet connections. Books are a meaningful and valuable asset in these communities.

Through a bit of research, The Gullos learned of **Step by Step** and got to work. Through word of mouth, their mission to collect books began to spread and books began to be donated and to take over their home. Several drop off locations were set up to receive donated books and The Gullos and Diane Meyers,

another Lake Zurich resident kept filling their house and garage. Every trip they took to Kentucky where their son was in school included the challenging drive to drop of a load of books at the **Step by Step** - Big Ugly Community Center.



Shari is pictured here at the Big Ugly Community Center with a few of the happy recipients who selected books for themselves and their family members.

Without an overall plan, Shari explains that resources presented themselves in perfect time. “A donor for boxes emerged so more books were able to be packed and weighed in preparation for ground transport. The **North Shore Distillery** company in Libertyville offered free recycled boxes to us and we gratefully picked them up as they became available.”

Another solution was offered by generous company owners Greg and Sharon Hatz, who run **ATTS Logistics** in Lake Zurich, a freight brokerage that offers personalized service for national and international shipping needs for a variety of



Greg and Sharon Hatz at **ATTS Logistics** and the Gullos discuss strategies for shipment as they talk among the boxed books that represent their adjusted goal of 50,000.

companies. The Hatz family offered warehouse space to the Gullos to store the books in preparation for shipment. This offer couldn’t have come soon enough because the Gullos were out of space in their own home and it was becoming unmanageable.

Today, the Gullos have met their upgraded goal of 50,000 books

collected and are in need of resources for shipping costs and transport. They intend to continue their work with Step by Step to determine the specific future ongoing needs of **Step by Step’s Big Ugly Community Center** that serves hundreds of West Virginia families.

Shari states “We are amazed how this opportunity came to us, and how people responded. We could have never imagined having a house full of books, and how solutions presented themselves to us as the needs were defined. We are so grateful to all the donors and the **North Shore Distillery** and **ATTS Logistics** companies for playing a critical role in our efforts. We are especially thankful that local people saw a need in a very vulnerable part of the country and were willing to help. We aren’t entirely sure what is next, but we know the need will present itself!”

For More Information contact Shari Gullo at biguglybookdrive@gmail.com.