

If it involves books, Miss Mel's involved



JEFF WILLHELM - jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com

Melissa Hager livens up Nursery Rhymes Day at the Alexander County Public Library in Taylorsville. "Miss Mel" dresses up, sings, dances, does skits and all sorts of stuff for the preschoolers who come to visit the library twice a week.

BY CHANDA BLITCH
Special Correspondent

Thanks to a librarian with a dream, the tiny Alexander County Library in Taylorsville is making more and more young people feel at home.

In fact, from birth on, children - and their parents - are invited to come in and see what's happening in the world of books and ideas, courtesy of programs created by children's librarian Melissa Hager, or "Miss Mel," as she is commonly known.

"Even the adults call me Miss Mel," said Hager, 40. "I always say, you can call me Mel if you want to. People think that's just funny but my friends all through my life have called me Mel. And especially for children, Melissa's just too hard to

Reading Programs

For more information on reading programs for young people, call Miss Mel at the Alexander County Library at 828-632-4058, or visit www.alexanderlibrary.org and click on "Just for Kids."

say," she added.

Offerings at the library include Preschool Storytime with Miss Mel, where little people from birth to age 5 are welcome to listen to stories, dance and have fun.

"I have lots of energy - we do crazy dances and songs like 'Five Little Monkeys,' or 'Buzz Buzz,'" Hager said. "I get

down with 'em!"

Also popular is Babytime Storytime for birth to 18 months, led by volunteer Candace Gale. Gale, a poet and former education coordinator for the Stillpoint Center, reads to babies, does finger rhymes and songs, and shows parents how to do infant massage, Hager said.

"Last time she had like six or seven babies, which is significant for here - that's not Hickory, that's Taylorsville," Hager said. "She started out with just a few and now it's growing. It's a neat program we're glad we're able to offer."

Hager's newest reading program is for high school students who want to stretch their wings a bit. "My pet name for them is my YA-YA's - the 'Young Adults Read-

Miss Mel lights flame of learning

Librarian *from IV*

ing Young Adult' book club - young adults reading young adult literature," she said.

The YA-YA's started last year, Hager said. "The idea arose from one of my volunteers, a rising freshman, April Russell - it was her brainchild," Hager said. "She asked about a book club for high school students and then suggested we start one."

Hager called Julie Horton and Meg Eggleton, media coordinators at Alexander Central High School, who said they'd let students know, while April set to work as well.

"April was also putting the word out and got one other girl, a senior, Casey Noe. They were my founders, and that's all we had for a few months," Hager said. "Then they got in a couple more friends, we grew to four, then we got a couple of guys - hooray, it's so neat to find boys who like to read - so by the end of the year we had six, an adequate amount, a perfect size," she said.

"I lost my two seniors last year but my male YA-YA's are back, so I'm excited," she said. "We only have one more slot and we're trying to fill it."

The Young Adults group reads contemporary literature like "The Secret Life of Bees," and classics such as "Tess of the d'Urbervilles." They finished the year with "1984."

"When I read it in college we laughed and said, 'Ooh, next year's 1984, is it going to happen?' But it was spooky to read it as an adult, 20-some-odd years after I first read it in college," she said. "How could George Orwell have foreseen so much back when he wrote it in the 1940s? Today it was totally different for the students when they read it. It wasn't funny, it was prettv intense," she said.

According to Hager, a huge project for the Alexander County Library was this year's Collaborative Summer Reading Program, "Paws, Claws, Scales and Tales." The program links 32 state agencies to provide quality reading materials at low cost to libraries, she said.

Programs on N.C. animals and

on venomous spiders and snakes brought a variety of creatures to Taylorsville to meet young people, while other events like volunteer clowns, a presentation on safety around dogs and a performance by the Bright Star Children's Theatre were also highlights for different age groups.

All told, Hager said, 682 students signed up, and 480 took part. "We had more participate this year than even signed up last year," she said. "We couldn't have done it without all our wonderful volunteers, but when you're a small library like we are, that's really significant," she said.

Posted on one wall in the library are animal-shaped cutouts with students' names displayed, along with the number of hours and minutes spent reading this summer. "We leave that up all year, so they can see how much they really read," Hager said.

"We count the time read, not the number of books. Because there are so many children out there that say, 'I hate reading,' if you force a child to read a whole book in order to be able to write the title down, you're going to turn them off.

"But let them read just 15 minutes a day and they'll stay sharp - that's why we don't do titles. I want a child to enjoy what they're reading - even if it's a Game Boy magazine and they read one article, that counts,"

Hager said. "If you're reading the Bible in Sunday School, even if you're helping your mom with a recipe, if it's just five minutes, you're still reading."

Hager was born and raised in West Jefferson, then attended UNC Chapel Hill - "I'm a voracious Tar Heel," she laughed - where she majored in sociology with a secondary concentration in chemistry. Her path took her to Hickory, where she worked in real estate and served as president of the Catawba Valley Association of Realtors.

There she also met her husband, Hickory native Brent Hager. They were married on Barrett Mountain in Taylorsville, ended up buying land there and moving to Alexander County in 2001 with their children, Barrett, 10, and Allison, 8. She joined the library staff in November 2004.

Miss Mel says she's especially grateful for the Alexander County Friends of the Library, who contribute funds to support kids' programming, plus all-important volunteers. Hager's enthusiasm also includes dreams for Alexander County Library's future and current limited space.

"I'm on a private mission to get so much going for this library, we're going to have to move," Hager said. "We just don't have the space to do what I'd like. I hope to get this library moving."