2025 ANNUAL REPORT



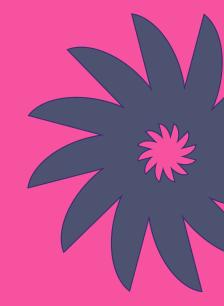
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOUP,

EST. FESTIVAL 1969



Director's Statement





Maya Kucij
Festival Director

Sometimes I forget what it's like to experience the festival for the first time. For so many kids, it's not just their first visit to UCM—it's their first time on any college campus. They light up discovering the scale of Highlander Theatre or getting a favorite drink from the Elliott Student Union.

When the planning details start to feel overwhelming, I think about those busloads of kids and their grown-ups, arriving full of excitement, eager to meet some of their favorite authors.

This year, thanks to funding from the Horizons initiative, UCM Digital Media Production graduate Cassidy Lesire helped capture that energy by interviewing some of our young participants. One of my favorite moments in the video is from Konner Kerly of Sacred Heart, who said, "[The Children's Literature Festival] is a good way to expand your reading personality!"

Indeed it is. Thank you, Konner, for helping me put into words some of the magic of this annual event.



Look for a link to the video on the last page!

Festival Overview

In 2025 the Children's Literature Festival at the University of Central Missouri engaged more than 3,500 participants. The main festival brought together 22 authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults, each offering multiple presentations over two and a half days to students in grades 3–10. Schools attended from across Missouri and presenters shared their creative processes, personal stories, and encouragement for aspiring writers and artists, giving students direct access to the voices behind the literature they read and love.

Thanks to Horizon funding, a joint initiative through Missouri Humanities, Missouri Arts Council and the Division of Tourism, the 56th festival had a number of pre-festival events that were free and open to the public. Graphic novelist Pedro Martín, who is based in Kansas City, visited UCM for a two-part event. He delivered a talk for a public audience that included students from UCM's Illustration program, offering insight into the creative process of crafting his graphic memoir, *Mexikid*, and the value of authentic voice. Martín also gave a dynamic presentation to 270 seventh-grade students from Warrensburg Middle School (who all received copies of *Mexikid*), sharing his experience as a first-generation Mexican American artist and the real-life inspirations behind his graphic memoir. His storytelling encouraged students to reflect on themes of identity, family, and resilience. Both sessions extended the impact of the festival beyond its main days and audiences.

Additionally, the 56th festival's programming included a special visit by Raytown author Dorinda Nicholson to the Missouri Veterans Home in Warrensburg. Speaking to an audience of more than 80 residents, family members, and staff, Nicholson drew from her nonfiction books and her experience as a child witness to the Pearl Harbor attack. Her presentation resonated deeply with the veteran audience and fostered meaningful reflection and conversation.



Festival Goals

O1

To provide the experience of meeting a published author or illustrator in person

To promote reading and validate the research and creativity behind the process of bookmaking

To make a significant and visible contribution to a culture of literacy in the state of Missouri

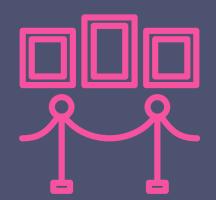
To work towards fair representation of all groups within our Festival program and to be truly inclusive by seeking active participation by all individuals

New in 2025



Thanks to feedback from our 2024 CLF survey, we made a number of changes to make registration easier. We provided earlier access to the master schedule (that shows the times for all presentations) and enhanced registration support with FAQs and how-to videos.

Thanks to early coordination with UCM colleagues, festival attendees were able to view the annual high school art competition show in the hallways of the Art & Design building. We also were able to use the gallery space as a festival venue.





The festival experimented with two apps:

- what3words, a free system that identifies every 3meter square on Earth with a unique combination of three words, that allows users to easily share and locate precise locations using simple, memorable addresses, &
- SportsYou, a free communication platform usually used by athletic communities to connect students in a team and help with content sharing, announcements and scheduling.

What3words was marketed to help both volunteers and attendees identify locations quickly and easily. We encouraged all of our volunteers to opt in to using SportsYou.

New in 2025, continued



We changed the location of volunteers from the second floor to the first floor of the library. This helped with concerns about noise, but also brought some challenges that we will continue to improve upon.

We love being able to use the Highlander Theatre! In order to be good stewards of the space, we increased our communication about appropriate behavior and shared more information in advance. Tables were provided for folks to leave beverages and food, which helped minimize the amount of trash left behind.





We were very fortunate to be able to borrow the services of UCM's professional photographer, Andrew Mather, who took many fabulous photos of the 2025 festival.

We brought our volunteer survey into the same system (Qualtrics) as our surveys for presenters, attendees and Sunday Luncheon.



New in 2025, continued



Heartland Book Festival



Special Collections Library Assistant and Registration Coordinator Liz Riggs at the Heartland Book Festival.

In Fall 2024, we attended the Heartland Book Festival at the Kansas City Public Library to share the CLF with over 200 attendees. We distributed flyers, buttons, and contest-winning bookmarks, signed up 52 new newsletter subscribers, and connected with educators, parents, authors, booksellers, and nonprofits—including our friends at Missouri Humanities. Many were surprised to learn our Festival is so close to home, making it a great opportunity to build community connections.

The Rabbit hOle

The Rabbit hOle, an immersive storybook museum, opened in Kansas City in March 2024. In 2025, several presenters enjoyed a visit after landing at the Kansas City airport on their way to Warrensburg.

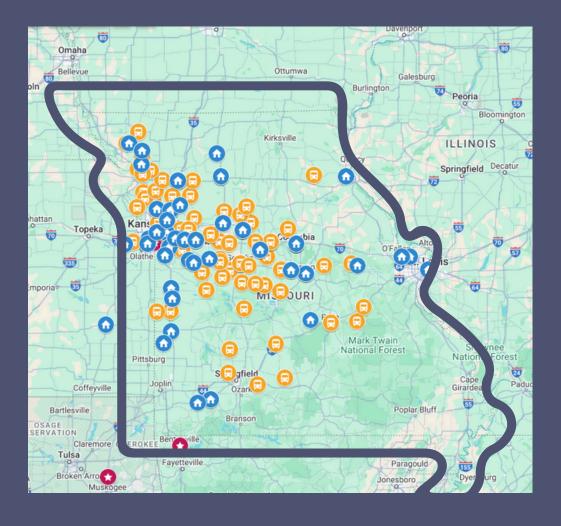


Lilliam Rivera and Varsha Bajaj enjoy the kitchen from Robert McCloskey's Blueberries for Sal.



Melissa Stewart, Varsha Bajaj, volunteer driver/UCM Music professor Dr. Allison Robbins, and Lilliam Rivera.

Our Attendees



In 2025, the CLF welcomed 17 new schools, with participants coming from 36 Missouri counties, as well as schools from Arkansas and Kansas.

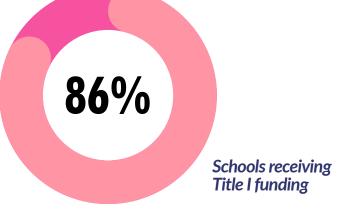


http://bit.ly/3Tw8mAD

Serving Our Communities

Title I is a federally funded program that targets schools and school districts where a high percentage of students are from low income families. The purpose of Title I funding is to ensure that all children meet state academic standards by helping schools establish programs to help these students, often programs that wouldn't be possible without some outside funding. 86% percent of the schools who attended the CLF in 2025 received Title I federal funds (99 schools), which is slightly higher than in 2024 (85%).

"Great program, fantastic opportunity for our students. Very well put together. THANK YOU for doing this each year. Our students thoroughly enjoy it and look forward to it every year. What a blessing to have this so close to us."





Attendee Survey

Immediately following the festival, postevent surveys were emailed to the primary contact for each attending school, as well as to all individual attendees. The survey included questions grouped into three key areas:

Registration, Communication & Campus

they visited to read."

Navigation; Author and Illustrator

Sessions; and Book Sales & Publicity. Respondents had the option to enter a drawing for a thank-you incentive—school representatives could win a \$50 certificate toward Book Sales, while individual attendees were eligible for free registration for a family of four at a future festival.

"It was a great experience.

I went twice as a kid in the 90's and I was so happy to finally come back and share it with my kids. They loved it and want to come back every year!"

event I have taken students to in my
26 years of teaching. We return again
and again. The author presentations get better
and better, and our parent chaperones always
shower the event with praise. Thank you
for making this such an impactful
experience for our students."

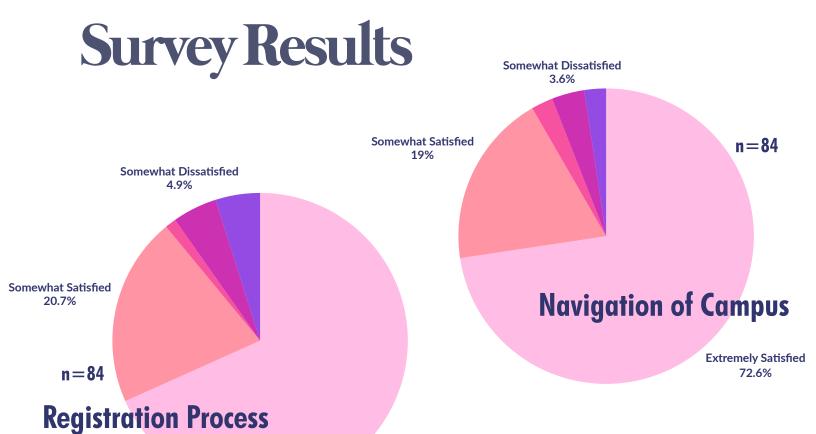
"I LOVE that you keep

having this. My readers

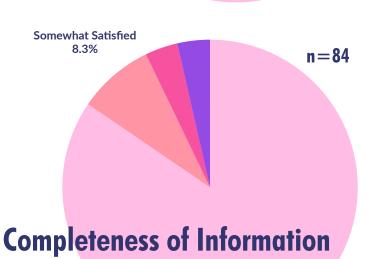
"I feel like my students

had the opportunity to see that they can
become authors if they really have the desire!
It also gave them to encouragement to find
more books by those specific authors

have the best time, going to celebrate
their reading successes and hearing
from new, interesting authors, and
talking about the presentations after.
It is SUCH a great day. Thank you so
much for hosting a great
festival!!!



Extremely Satisfied 68.3%



Shared Prior to CLF

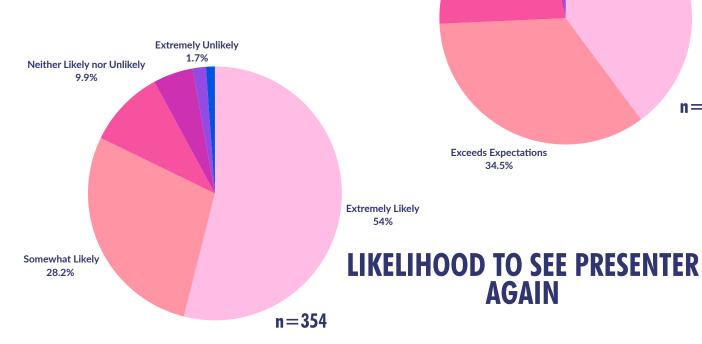
Extremely Satisfied 84.5%

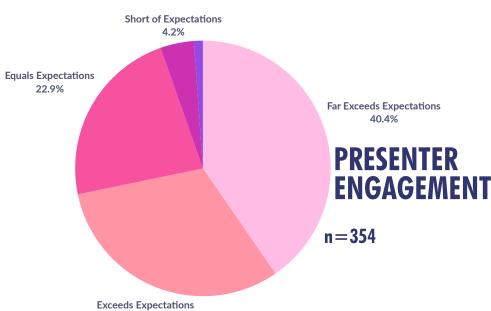
Survey results indicated overwhelmingly positive attendee satisfaction with pre-festival processes, information-sharing, and campus navigation. We remain committed to refining and improving our registration system to keep getting better and better!

Survey Results continued

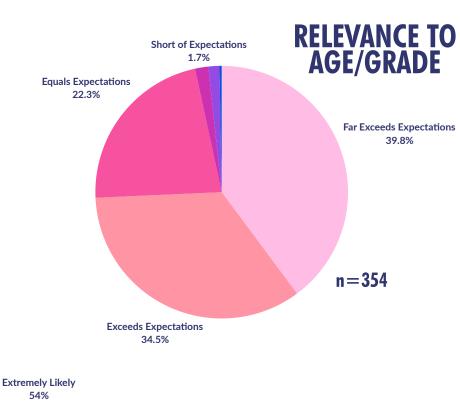
Nearly 72% of all respondents indicated that the 2025 presenters either exceeded or far exceeded expectations for engagement. An even higher percentage (74.3%) found the presentations to be relevant to their students' grade levels or ages.

Additionally, 54% of respondents reported being extremely likely to attend another presentation by the same author in the future. These results are consistent with previous years, suggesting stable and positive perceptions over time.





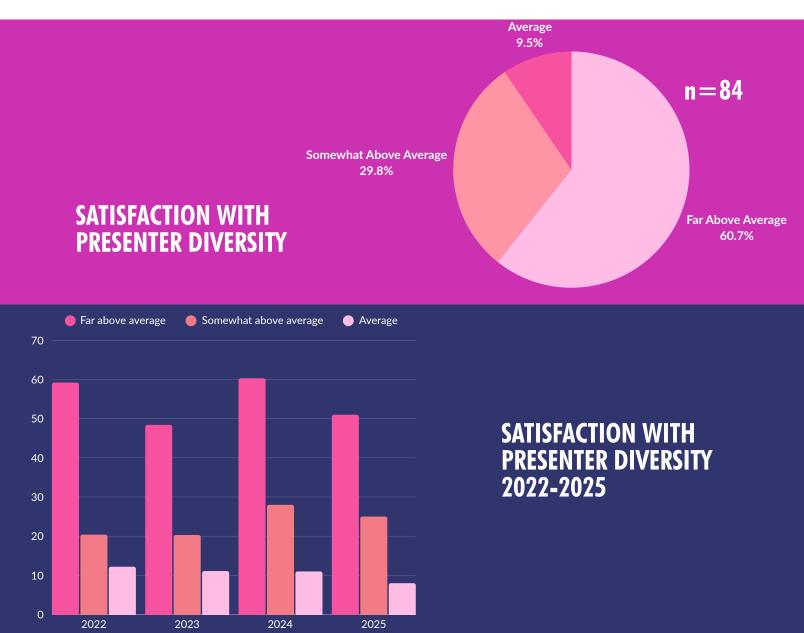
31.4%



Survey Results continued

One of our goals is to work toward fair representation of all groups within our Festival program and to be truly inclusive by encouraging active participation from all individuals. To support this aim, we actively promote literature that reflects and honors the diverse experiences and identities of all young people.

This commitment continues to guide our efforts in 2025.



Presenter Survey

A post-event survey was distributed to all 2025 Festival presenters. The survey included questions across four categories: Pre-Festival Experience, Festival Experience, Presentation Sessions, and Looking Forward. 16 of the 22 in-person presenters completed the survey. Of those who responded, 15 rated the Festival as extremely well organized (the other did not respond), and 100% expressed interest in being invited back for a future event. Festival personnel received excellent ratings from 15 presenters (again, 1 non-response), while volunteer support was rated as excellent by 9 and good by 6. Recurring challenges remain, particularly with tech support on Monday morning and ensuring that volunteers are thoroughly prepared for their roles.

"Thank you for inviting me.
The teachers, and librarians
had prepared the children.
The kids were invested and
asked the most insightful
questions."

"Every student I met was over the moon to meet the authors and talk about books they are reading. ... There was someone here for every type of reader."

"I've done so many book festivals over the years and I've never, ever been to an event that's so well organized. I loved the detailed schedule.

I'm so grateful my presentation was ready to roll when I got there, with somebody close if I needed any help with tech. ... I'm not just throwing out fancy compliments for kicks, I promise -- this is such a special event you all have created. The best part was the JOY radiating on kids who came to my presentations. They were excited, engaged, and incredibly sweet. It was a real honor to be included this year."



Dorinda Nicholson and Varsha Bajaj

Sunday Luncheon

A post-event survey was distributed for the second consecutive year to 2025 luncheon attendees. Response rates declined from 25 in 2024 to 11 fully completed surveys. Of these respondents, 7 were returning attendees and 4 were new.

The registration process received high marks, with 64% of respondents reporting they were extremely satisfied, 18% somewhat satisfied, and 18% neutral. Satisfaction with the venue and atmosphere was also strong, with 73% extremely satisfied. Notably, 100% of respondents were extremely satisfied with luncheon speaker Pablo Cartaya.

Sodexo provided this year's meal service, which faced challenges including a vegetarian meal substitution error and concerns about the quality of the chicken tenders. Based on Sodexo's feedback and attendee responses, a return to a buffet format is recommended to reduce food waste and better accommodate the preferences of older youth. If plated service continues, simpler, widely appealing options are advised—such as fruit instead of salad, grilled chicken with optional sauce, green beans, and mashed or scalloped potatoes. Cupcakes were well-received, and adding a coffee station in Room 237A is recommended to support early-arriving authors.



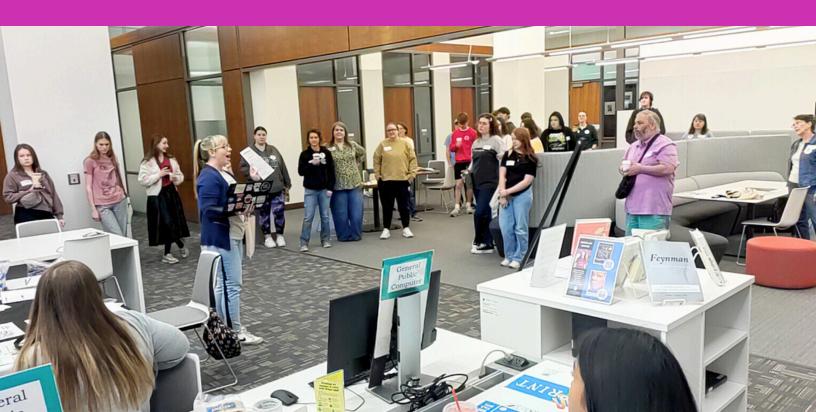




Volunteer recruitment was highly successful this year, with 55 individuals volunteering on Monday and another 55 on Tuesday. This strong turnout allowed us to assign 2–5 volunteers to support each author. Presenters in larger venues or with higher audience numbers were assigned additional volunteers to help manage crowd flow and direct traffic.

The volunteer control center was relocated to the first floor of the JCK Library, a change from previous years when it was housed on the second floor. This new location proved ideal for volunteer check-in and visibility. It also allowed us to assist several parents, teachers, and students in locating their groups more easily. However, having presenters and volunteers on separate floors created challenges in connecting them efficiently. For next year, we will explore a system to streamline these connections—such as asking authors to "check in" when they are ready to travel to their venue, at which point we can immediately connect them with their volunteer team.

Additionally, the layout of the first floor, with its many blind spots and dividing walls, made it difficult to track volunteer locations. We used the SportsYou app for the first time this year as a soft launch for volunteer communication, and it showed promise as a tool for quickly connecting with individuals when an author was ready to move. Using this app more intentionally next year may help resolve coordination challenges.



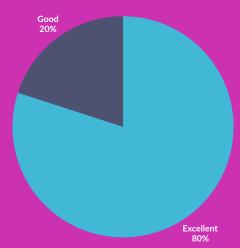
Volunteer Survey

In 2025, the volunteer survey was transitioned into the same Qualtrics system used for other Festival feedback. A total of 25 volunteers responded. Most (20) rated their overall experience as excellent, and 5 as good. The majority felt well-prepared: 14 very prepared, 9 somewhat, 1 neutral, and 1 not very prepared.

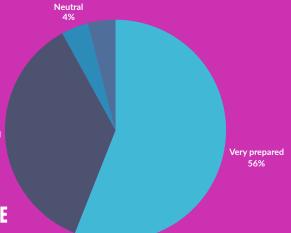
Volunteers reported strong support, with 23 saying staff and organizers were always available to assist, and 23 also found the training and orientation helpful. Festival organization received high marks: 14 said it was extremely well organized, 10 very well, and 1 moderately well. Most (24) felt they had the resources needed to complete their tasks; only one wished for more guidance. Navigation was generally smooth, though a few reported moderate difficulty. Communication was rated excellent by 16, good by 8, and poor by 1.

Of the two apps tested, SportsYou (communication) was found to be more helpful than what3words (navigation). Looking ahead, 20 respondents said they would volunteer again, 4 said maybe, and 1 said no.

Feedback praised the joy of working with students and authors, the helpfulness of staff, and the overall organization. Several volunteers highlighted the joy of seeing children's excitement, the inspiration they drew from author presentations, and the strong sense of organization and support throughout the event. Suggestions included improving overflow planning, ensuring volunteers have partners, and refining author/volunteer coordination. Several long-time participants expressed gratitude and excitement to return again next year.



OVERALL VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE



PREPARATION FOR VOLUNTEER ROLE

Somewhat prepared

Book Sales

In 2025, we again partnered with the UCM University Store to use their cash register system, which greatly streamlined the reconciliation process. As in previous years, book stock was divided across three dates—Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday—to help ensure availability throughout the Festival and minimize disappointment for later attendees.

Survey results show strong engagement with Book Sales: 93% of respondents reported visiting, 73% made purchases, and 77% were very or somewhat satisfied with the selection. However, book sales remain difficult to predict, and several popular titles sold out early, resulting in some disappointed attendees.



Bookmark Contest

The CLF Bookmark Contest. launched in 2019, celebrated its fifth year in 2025. This year brought in 228 entries from 35 schools, a 67% increase in the number of schools submitting entries, along with several submissions from homeschool students. Katie Watson, interim professor of Illustration at UCM. served as this year's judge. Three winning designs were printed and distributed during the Festival. Winners and honorable mentions received certificates by mail, and students received multiple copies of their winning bookmarks. All entries were proudly displayed at Book Sales in the Elliott Student Union.

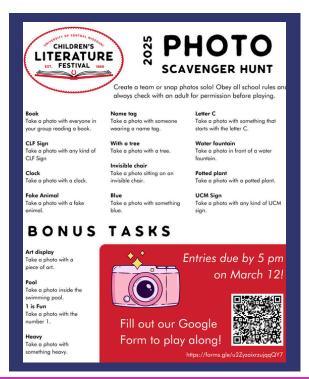




Grade 3-4 Winner: Ellie Schirmer, Russel Blvd. Elementary Grade 5-6 Co-Winner: Lila Hynds, Holden Elementary Grade 5-6 Co-Winner: Rowan Mosher, Truman Elementary

Photo Scavenger Hunt

Every year we offer another way to enjoy the beautiful UCM campus during any festival downtime. We provide a list of photo prompts and some brief rules. Although we have received a lot of positive feedback about this activity via surveys, we don't always receive copies of the photos people take! This year 28 teams participated in the Scavenger Hunt.





Key Recommendations

1 Improve interior signage and wayfinding

Add clear directional signs inside buildings and at main entrances to help attendees quickly locate session rooms and large restrooms.

02 Refine registration process

Work with Regpack Support to add editing features and possible waitlist; release maps with room assignments in advance to support equitable access and better planning for attendees.

Optimize book sales and signing experiences

Explore a return to book pre-orders, enforce a books-only signing policy, and better space out or stagger presenter tables to manage crowd flow during book signing.

1 Increase illustrator presence and interactive sessions

Include more illustrators in the lineup and prioritize presenters who engage students actively, especially in the afternoon sessions

O5 Strengthen volunteer communication & readiness

Use a communication app more intentionally for real-time coordination, and provide clearer guidance on responsibilities, session timing and presenter connections.



Thank you 2025 CLF Presenters!





Back row: Roderick Townley, Andrea Wang, Traci Sorell, Aiden Thomas, Melissa Stewart, Dorinda Nicholson, Jeff Zentner,

Leah Henderson, Roland Smith, Kelly Barnhill

Middle row: Varsha Bajaj, Sarah Sax, Erin Stewart, Gary Schmidt, Tom Phillips

Front row: Pedro Martín, Pablo Cartaya, Grace Townley-Lott, Celia Pérez, Lilliam Rivera, Natalie Lloyd

Missing: Mary Downing Hahn, who participated virtually









Becky Sadler Klein

whose generous support funds the Gilbert-Sadler Speaker series

We appreciate ...

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Miles McNeeley
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Cindy Skahan
Michelle Trent
Carol Knight
Jones Knight
Maddie Knight
Nikhil Marri
Heather Culbertson
Daniel Okejero



Festival Committee

Liz Riggs, Registration & Logistics
Chad Marnholtz, Book Sales
Kim Anthes, Book Sales
Kirsten Shaw, Volunteers
Brea Parnell, Social Media & Outreach
Sahitha Koppula, CLF Student Worker
Charitha Sri Shavva, CLF Student Worker
Maya Kucij, Director

All of our CLF Volunteers

All the individuals who joined us, along with the groups from: Warrensburg High School National Honor Society, Smith-Cotton High School Honor Society, Jasper County High School Epsilon Beta, & UCM ADRIAN ELEMENTARY

ADRIAN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

THE ATELIER ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL

AURORA JR. HIGH

AVENUE CITY SCHOOL BENTON SCHOOL

BLACKWATER R-II
BLUE HILLS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LIBRARY

BOLIVAR MIDDLE SCHOOL

BOONVILLE HIGH SCHOOL

BRUNSWICK SCHOOLS

BUCKNER ELEMENTARY

BUEKER MIDDLE SCHOOL

BUNCETON

CALIFORNIA MIDDLE SCHOOL CAMERON HIGH SCHOOL

CAMERON INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

CAMERON VETERANS MIDDLE SCHOOL

CARROLLTON MIDDLE SCHOOL

CENTRAL ARKANSAS CHRISTIAN

CENTRAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

COLE CAMP R1

CONCORDIA R-2

CORDILL MASON ELEMENTARY

CRAWFORD COUNTY R-I

DAVID BARTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

DAVIS R-12 SCHOOL DISTRICT

DOGWOOD ELEMENTARY

EAST BUCHANAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

ELDON MIDDLE SCHOOL

FIRE PRAIRIE UPPER ELEMENTARY

FRANKLIN SMITH ELEMENTARY

GENTRY MIDDLE SCHOOL

GREEN RIDGE SCHOOL

GUADALUPE CENTERS ELEMENTARY

HAMILTON ELEMENTARY

HARRISBURG HIGH SCHOOL

HARTVILLE ELEMENTARY R-2

HARTVILLE MIDDLE SCHOOL

HAWTHORNE ELEMENTARY

HOLDEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

HUME R-8 SCHOOL

IMMANUEL LUTHERAN SCHOOL

INDIAN TRAILS ELEMENTARY

JAMES LEWIS ELEMENTARY

JOHN NOWLIN ELEMENTARY KEARNEY ELEMENTARY

KNOB NOSTER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

KNOB NOSTER MIDDLE SCHOOL

LAFAYETTE COUNTY C-1 MIDDLE SCHOOL

LANGE MIDDLE SCHOOL

LATHROP ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

LAURA SPEED ELLIOTT MIDDLE SCHOOL

LEBANON MIDDLE SCHOOL

LEE'S SUMMIT MIDDLE SCHOOLS

LEXINGTON TRAILS MIDDLE SCHOOL LEWIS AND CLARK MIDDLE SCHOOL

LONE JACK C6 SCHOOL DISTRICT



PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS



WHITEMAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
WILLARD INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL NORTH
WILLIAM YATES ELEMENTARY
WINDSOR ELEMENTARY

LUCY FRANKLIN ELEMENTARY

MARYVILLE R-II SCHOOL DISTRICT

MASON ELEMENTARY (LEE'S SUMMIT)

MATTHEWS ELEMENTARY-GRAIN VALLEY

MIAMI R-I ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

MID BUCHANAN ELEMENTARY

MONTESSORI SCHOOLHOUSE HIGGINSVILLE

MORGAN COUNTY R-II MIDDLE SCHOOL VERSAILLES

MORGAN COUNTY R 1

NODAWAY-HOLT ELEMENTARY NORBORNE SCHOOL NORTH ANDREW

NORTH PLATTE INTERMEDIATE
NORTH PLATTE JUNIOR HIGH 6-8

NORTH SHELBY

OAKHILL DAY SCHOOL

OASIS TUTORING

ODESSA HIGH SCHOOL

ODESSA UPPER ELEMENTARY

OUR LADY OF LOURDES INTERPARISH SCHOOL

PAUL KINDER MIDDLE SCHOOL

PETTIS COUNTY R12

PILOT GROVE C4

POLO R-VII SCHOOL DISTRICT

PRAIRIE BRANCH ELEMENTARY

RICH HILL SCHOOL

RIVER OAK CHRISTIAN ACADEMY

ROLLA JR HIGH

ROLLA MIDDLE SCHOOL

RUSSELL BOULEVARD ELEMENTARY

SACRED HEART

SAINTS PETER AND PAUL

SEDALIA MIDDLE SCHOOL

SHAWNEE R-3

SLATER ALEXANDER ELEMENTARY

SMITH-COTTON JUNIOR HIGH

SMITHTON R-6

SMITHVILLE ELEMENTARY

SNI-A-BAR ELEMENTARY

SOUTH CALLAWAY

SOUTHVIEW ELEMENTARY

ST. PETER CATHOLIC SCHOOL

STEWARTSVILLE ELEMENTARY

STONY POINT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SUNNY POINTE ELEMENTARY

SUNRISE ELEMENTARY

SWEET SPRINGS R-7

THOMAS JEFFERSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

TRINITY LUTHERAN JEFFERSON CITY, MO

TRUMAN HIGH SCHOOL

TURNER USD 202

VAN HORN HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARY

VERSAILLES ELEMENTARY

VOY SPEARS JR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

WARSAW SOUTH ELEMENTARY

WELLINGTON NAPOLEON R-9

WEST MIDDLE SCHOOL

WEST PLATTE ELEMENTARY



Check out our new CLF video, made with support of the Horizons initiative, produced by UCM alumna, Cassidy Lesire





