

## COVER STORY

Dressed as a knight, Sir Justin Bowen, 8, practices his swordsmanship at Princess Anne Recreation Center.



# BOREDOM? BOOK 'EM!

City's free summer reading program ends with party in 'Camelot,' but organizers hope the habit lasts a lifetime.

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**S**URROUNDED BY KNIGHTS, ladies, jugglers, even a fire eater, Erin Crouch, 8, was learning a lesson Saturday.

Reading is a good thing. She and dozens of other children were being rewarded with a Camelot theme party to celebrate their participation in one of the city library system's summer reading clubs.

Banners, balloons and books were the backdrop for Camelot Days, the big summer's end gala for children enrolled in the younger bookmobile reading program.

Queen Guinevere (Kathy Ledsome of Kathy's Characters) in her gown of blue and gold stayed busy at the party at the Princess Anne Recreation Center painting butterflies and flowers on the faces of the young princesses and sketching dragons and skulls on the bold knights.

Merman the magician delighted the children by swallowing the fire from his flaming torch, but first they had to shout: "Read a book." They did. He

did. And the crowd reacted with "oohs" and "ahs."

What all that means is when Erin starts third grade at Red Mill Elementary next month, she'll not only have memories of her Camelot party to talk about, but a list of books to show her teacher how she kept up with her reading skills while school was out.

It should make her teacher happy. It's one of the things educators say children should do to keep their school-year lessons fresh during the break.

Reading during the summer is no chore for Erin. "I just love to read. In the past few days, I've read at least 12 books," she said Saturday.

## ON THE COVER

Magician Merrill Merman of Magic Adventures in Virginia Beach eats fire for the children as part of the Camelot Day party. Staff photo by JOSEPH JOHN KOTLOWSKI

That's the kind of talk city librarians like to hear. For more than two decades, they have gone all out to promote summer reading in a big way.

Free summer reading clubs in city libraries and the bookmobile have grown by leaps and bounds over the years, said Debbie Wolcott, a library supervisor. This summer's theme of Camelot has attracted thousands of children.

"We want to promote reading. We know they're out of school and it's easy to slide out of practice," said Wolcott.

According to John Stewart, assistant director of libraries, between 8,000 and 10,000 children sign up for the free clubs each summer in city libraries. Usually about half complete the program by reading at least 12 books or reading for 20 minutes a day during the six-week session.

Those who participate are treated to parties like the one Saturday, puppet shows or other favors, but usually the big thing is getting to choose a free book of their own at the end of the program. Among the most popular of the complimentary offerings are books from the "Goosebumps," "American Girl" and "Magic Eye" series as well as easy readers about "Clifford" or the "Tooth Fairy."



Waiting to have their faces painted during Camelot Day festivities are princesses Casey Doyle, 7, left; Meaghan David, 8, and her sister Cally David, 6.

Staff photos by JOSEPH JOHN KOTLOWSKI



Brett Ballou, 7, tries to keep both his feet off the ground, according to the instructions of magician Merrill Merman, Merman also delighted the children by swallowing the fire from his flaming torch, but first they had to shout: "Read a book."



Rachel Beckman, 6, sports a princess outfit made by her grandmother for Camelot Day. Rachel and her mother, Cathy, are bookmobile regulars.

"We're literally giving away 4,000 to 5,000 books each summer," Stewart said, adding that money for the free books comes from the Friends of the Virginia Beach Library.

Summer reading clubs are a traditional part of library services going back decades. Although fun is the name of the game, the effort is twofold. "The kids are out of school and have more time to enjoy reading simply for the pleasure of reading," Stewart said. In addition, "We know children who read will sustain their reading skills over their summer and return to school close to the skills they had when they left at the end of the year."

Librarians will go to great lengths to make the summer clubs fun for kids.

Saturday's party is an example. said Joyce Lathan, an information specialist. "We contacted over 20 businesses, merchants, organizations in the area, asking for donations for the children and they responded. Many of today's prizes and all of the refreshments were provided by them."

Every child received some type prize for coming: posters, food coupons, plastic swords. Parents, in appreciation for their support of the reading program, received CDs or cassettes provided by Blockbuster stores.

The kids arrived in medieval costume. So did the staff, dressed as everything from gypsy peddlers to ladies and knights. A volunteer, Wendy Messel, and Susan Head, manager of library outreach services, sat behind a table throughout the day creating crowns of flowers, stars and flowing veils for the girls and colorful visors for the boys.

Beach mom Cathy Beckman of Foxfire and daughter Rachel, 6, were regulars in the bookmobile's summer program and attended the party Saturday. They visited the bookmobile every Wednesday when it came to their neighborhood. "Rachel especially loves to watch for it. We walk to it and spend about a half hour looking over and choosing books," Cathy Beckman said.

"My husband and I read to Rachel every night. It's a special time for bonding. And, during the day when we're home together, Rachel will often shut off the TV and read to me. It's another outlet for her."

Dad Jim Ballou of Hunt Club Forest was also enthusiastic about the program. "Both Cally, 4, and Brett, 7, are good readers. It's important to start reading to children when they're young." He grinned as he added: "Brett even reads the sport pages with me now."

## GETTING KIDS TO READ

Here are some tips collected from parents and librarians for getting children to read regularly.

- Parents should make sure their children see them reading. Kids imitate adults and reading becomes something a child wants to do if he sees an adult doing it.
- Parents should encourage their children to discuss what they're reading. But the adults should avoid being "schoolish" and correcting a child when he talks about it.
- Don't insist a child finish every book he checks out of the library. He has the right to decide whether or not he likes it.
- Get the librarians to make suggestions. If a child liked a certain book, the staff can suggest another along the same lines.
- Read to your children every day, even if it's only for a little while.
- Take your children to the library and show them around. Let them explore a little for themselves.