

CLiF News

SUMMER 2026



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Dear Friends,



In a recent opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Brian Bannon, chief librarian at the New York Public Library, argued that addressing America's reading crisis begins with a shared commitment to removing barriers to book access. "A democracy needs its people to read, and it is society's job to make that possible," he wrote.

By supporting CLiF, you play a direct role in making that possible. You provide young readers with new books, equip teachers with engaging literacy resources, and enable rural public libraries to update and expand their collections. You help create experiences and opportunities that foster joyful connections with reading and writing. Your generosity opens doors for children and communities across Vermont and New Hampshire, and we are very grateful for your partnership.

As CLiF begins its new fiscal year on July 1, we are excited to expand our work to include statewide collaborations and community-wide literacy initiatives. In the months ahead, we will build on our proven grant programs while developing new models to increase our impact. We look forward to sharing updates as this work progresses.

With much appreciation,

Laura Rice
CLiF Executive Director

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Rajnii Eddins hosts a family literacy event at the school.

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE: The Year of the Book at JFK Elementary School

Winooski School District Librarian **Matt Gile** is the coordinator for the CLiF Year of the Book program at JFK Elementary School. Awarded annually, this \$25,000 literacy grant brings interactive author visits, experiential learning opportunities, and free book giveaways to 14 public elementary schools across Vermont and New Hampshire each school year.

JFK Elementary is unique in Vermont as the state's only minority-majority school. Sixty percent of students identify as non-white, and nearly half are multilingual learners, many coming from households where English is not spoken. Over sixty percent of the student body navigates the daily challenges of living in poverty.

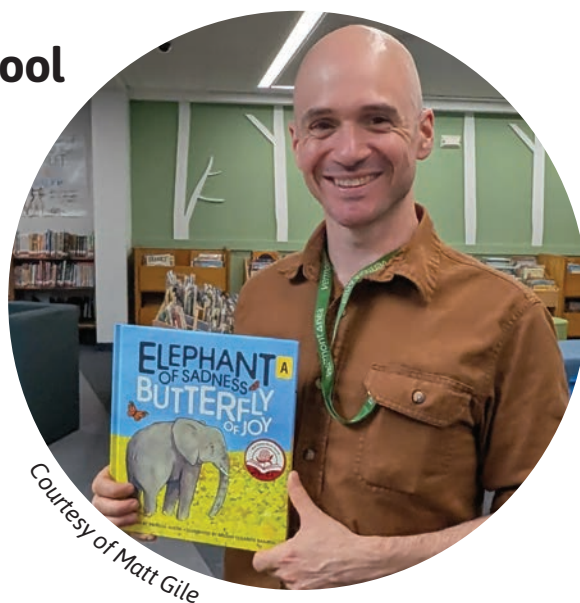
We asked Matt to tell us more about the Year of the Book at JFK Elementary, and what resonates with his students the most.

Q: What component of CLiF's Year of the Book programming has had the biggest impact on your school community?

Family literacy events bring the community together, and build enthusiasm and joy around reading! At every event, students get two books they can take home and cherish, and flooding our community with books has been really and truly wonderful. When students are motivated by joy and curiosity to read, it can carry them through moments of learning that can be difficult and frustrating for some, and it is a passion they can carry with them for life.

Q: What happens when students see their languages, cultures and lived experiences reflected in the books they read?

They feel seen and empowered! A student's home language is a subject they are experts in, and it is a powerful experience for them to become the teachers. Students become excited to start teaching their classmates and teachers all about their language.



Courtesy of Matt Gile

Q: Have you seen students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds find common ground through books?

Yes! It is a beautiful thing when students connect across language and culture over shared love of a story or character.

Q: You previously coordinated JFK's Year of the Book grant in 2018–19. Were there any favorite traditions or events you were especially excited to bring back this year?

The Family Literacy night was so fantastic in 2018, we were excited to continue that, and were so happy to have [CLiF presenter and poet] Rajnii Eddins facilitate it this time!

Q: How do you try to inspire joy in your library?

I incorporate student participation in storytime with music and embedded activity and movement. Storytime is my favorite part of my job!



Christy Mihaly, an award-winning author and poet who has written more than 40 books for young readers, has been a CLiF presenter since 2019. “I signed up as soon as I could after my first picture book was published!” She lives in Calais, VT where she serves on the selectboard and loves to walk in the woods.



Q. Your latest book, *America's Founding Myths...and What Really Happened* (Barefoot Books, May 2026), arrives as the country prepares to mark its 250th anniversary, and explores the historical facts behind some of our nation's most enduring origin stories. What do you hope young readers will take away from it?

I hope this book inspires conversations among young readers and adults about the true history of our country – where we came from, where we are today, and where we might be heading. I also hope it encourages kids to ask questions about our history – and other stories they hear.

This book, brilliantly illustrated by Marta Sevilla, is designed to keep readers laughing while letting them know they've been lied to! The beloved myths that we've grown up with, about everything from Columbus to the Pilgrims to the Founding Fathers, are flawed, incomplete, and often false. The country's true origin story is much more nuanced and richer. I hope *America's Founding Myths* helps all of us feel a deeper connection with what it means to be American today.

Q. Your books often tackle big topics such as history, civics, climate, and free speech. How do young readers engage with these themes?

Young people are concerned about the serious issues that face us. They want to know more, and when they see a problem, their instinct is often to try to fix it. But a book that just piles on endless descriptions of disaster can be overwhelming or alienating.

The key is to strike a balance. I try to address the hard reality but offer reasons for hope and suggestions for action. Humor also helps. I've used story-telling and silly jokes and worked with illustrators to add visual fun.

Q. What is the best part of sharing your work with children?

Honestly, standing before an audience of kids to talk about my writing requires serious mental and emotional energy. But those interactions are always inspiring. This is the audience that I'm writing for, and to see them engaging with my work is such a gift. The best part? I love their questions!

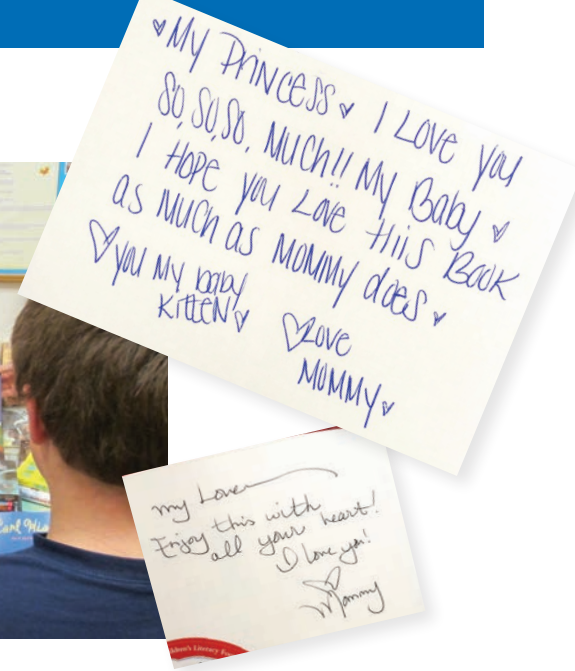
Q. Do you have a favorite memory from a CLiF presentation?

At my very first CLiF school visit, I did an interactive reading of my picture book about haymaking, *Hey, Hey, HAY!*. The school librarian used the recipe from the back of the book to make switchel—the traditional haymaker's drink—for the whole class to taste. It was such a fun way to bring the story to life for the students and for me. At that visit, and every one since, I've been so impressed by the dedication of the librarians and teachers who work their magic with kids and books every day.



Bridging the Distance

CLiF-supported storybook programs at Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility (VT) and Northern New Hampshire Correctional Facility (NH) offer incarcerated parents a means of staying connected with their children through books and stories, even when they can't be physically present. Throughout the year, parents at the facilities can choose CLiF books to send home to their families, along with audio recordings of themselves reading the stories aloud. Children report these books are their favorite CLiF books because the audio recordings deepen the experience of sharing stories with an incarcerated parent. These programs offer families a meaningful way to share bonding moments, even across distance, and are associated with improved family connections.



An incarcerated mother picks out books with her son.

Baby Books

In FY26, CLiF partnered with the Vermont Parent Child Center Network (VPCCN) to distribute 745 literacy kits to young families, each containing a new board book, a related developmental toy, and a reading resource guide for parents.

"We are extremely grateful to CLiF for this partnership, which brings books directly to our youngest Vermonters through programs such as Welcome Baby, home visiting services, and rural community playgroups," said VPCCN Director Ellen Amstutz. "These books and resources support nurturing, responsive parenting while sparking curiosity and a love of learning during the most rapid stage of brain development."

The initiative was part of CLiF's broader commitment to expanding literacy programming for children ages 0–5 in Vermont and New Hampshire, with a focus on reaching families early and building strong foundations for lifelong learning.



Nature as Teacher

The Afterschool in Nature program at Sage Mountain Botanical Sanctuary in East Barre, VT used CLiF Literacy Enrichment grant funding to implement a Nature Literacy Field Guide course for 30 students in grades 3–8. Held from November 2025 through March 2026, the program integrated reading, writing, and scientific observation into the nature-based afterschool curriculum. Students became authors, illustrators, and naturalists by creating personalized field guides documenting the plants, wildlife, and ecosystems of their local watershed.



The program culminated in a Family Literacy Event where students presented their completed field guides and led family members on guided nature walks, teaching parents, caregivers, and siblings to identify local species using their own published work. After one young writer presented his field guide to his mother, she commented that she had never before seen him sit still for a writing assignment. For him, the "textbook" was his own backyard, where animal track patterns captured his interest and imagination.

FEATURED BOARD MEMBER



A member of CLiF's Board of Directors since 2021, **Lisa Ferneau** served as Board Chair from July 2024 through June 2026. She is a reader, writer, soccer fan, art lover, and former corporate attorney, who left law practice to focus on volunteer service within her Upper Valley community. Lisa lives with her family in rural Canaan,

NH, in a "crooked 235-year-old house with its own stories to tell." She loves helping kids see the possibilities of life through reading, writing, art, and sport.

Q. How did you first get involved with CLiF?

I attended a holiday gathering in New London, NH where the hostess asked the guests to bring a new children's book for a nearby library participating in the CLiF Rural Library grant. The sky high stack on her table was filled with favorites I had read as a kid or was then reading to my own children.

Q. What speaks to you most about CLiF's mission?

Education research has long shown that proficiency in reading and writing is important to future life success. But CLiF wants kids to know that reading and writing can be adventurous, hilarious, even transformative and will take them to new places and times both real and imagined. When reading and writing become a pleasure rather than a chore, kids will do more of both.

Q. What stands out to you about serving on CLiF's Board of Directors, compared to other boards you've served on?

I have loved learning about board members' earliest literacy memories. From the reluctant and challenged readers to those who got a library card as soon as they could walk, all agree that access to literacy resources early in life plays a huge role in who they are today. Our board works hard to enable CLiF to offer FREE programming and brand-new books to the kids who need them the most.

Q. Is there a CLiF experience or moment that has been especially memorable for you?

Having attended many CLiF events in schools and libraries, I am humbled by the talented and committed teachers, librarians, and authors who are part of our children's literacy journey. The enthusiasm of CLiF's partners is contagious, and they always tell me how much CLiF's work makes a difference for them and their students.

Q. What's the last great book you read?

For me, a great book has authentic and flawed characters and lyrical language that evokes a sense of place. The most recent read that checked all my boxes was *Long Island* by Colm Tóibín.

WELCOME TO THE TEAM

Megan Miley joined the CLiF team in April 2026 as our new development manager. In her role, she oversees donor relations, corporate partnerships, and fundraising initiatives that help expand CLiF's impact across Vermont and New Hampshire. Prior to joining CLiF, she most recently worked at Casella, where she helped clients such as Keurig Dr. Pepper, Ben & Jerry's, and the University of Vermont realize their sustainability goals. She previously spent six years working in corporate development for the Maryland Public Television Foundation. Originally from Maryland, Megan now lives in Moretown, VT with her family. When she's not working, you can find her exploring the mountains on skis or by bike, depending on the season.



On a recent visit to CLiF headquarters, Megan's 10-year-old daughter, Maple, enjoyed checking out the giveaway library, and even tracked down a favorite book from her toddler days in the stacks!

BOOK IT FOR CLiF!



On May 23, Board Member **Zach Haggerty** hosted his 7th Annual Fun Run in support of CLiF. Many thanks to all who lent their support, either in person or from afar!

CHANGE MAKER

Jack Dalton, aka the “Kid Conservationist,” is a 16-year-old animal activist and author from New Hampshire whose work on behalf of endangered species has earned international recognition. Most recently, he was one of 10 young people selected by Disney as winners of the “Hop into the Animal Kingdom Challenge,” launched in celebration of Disney and Pixar’s film *Hoppers*, the 30th anniversary of the Disney Conservation Fund, and the 35th anniversary of Jane Goodall’s Roots & Shoots USA. CLiF is grateful to Jack for his generous donation of 80 copies of his children’s book, *Kawan the Orangutan, Lost in the Rainforest*, which will be shared with young readers across Vermont and New Hampshire.



READING PARTNERS

For a second consecutive year, CLiF partnered with **VTDigger** and Middlebury’s **Vermont Book Shop** on a special campaign supporting both childhood literacy and local journalism. For every donation made to VTDigger, Vermont Book Shop generously underwrote the cost of a brand-new book to be donated to a local child through CLiF. The campaign’s goal was to provide 400 new books to young readers while sustaining independent reporting statewide.



CONFERENCE RECAP



More than 100 educators, librarians and literacy advocates joined CLiF for the 2026 Community Literacy Conference on March 26 at the Fireside Inn in West Lebanon, NH. Keynote speaker **Jarrett J. Krosoczka** earned rave reviews, the panels and breakout sessions were engaging and educational,

and the traditional CLiF book raffle was as popular as ever! Our thanks to everyone who presented and attended – we’re already looking forward to next year! A special shoutout to CLiF Program Manager **Cassie Willner** for all her hard work on this event.

LITERACY BOOST



The Neil & Louise Tillotson Fund

CLiF is the recipient of a \$20,000 grant from the **Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund** that will expand literacy resources and programming across the Androscoggin Valley in Coos County, New Hampshire. Building on existing Year of the Book partnerships with Berlin Elementary School in Berlin and Edward Fenn Elementary School in Gorham, CLiF will launch a year-long literacy initiative that engages multiple community partners and promotes sustained attention to literacy development throughout the region.



Short and Sweet

Xander, age 7 (on left), and **Aaruhi**, age 5, two of the winners of CLiF’s 2026 Two-Sentence Story Contest show off their book prizes. This year’s contest challenged young writers to come up with an original Tall Tale in just two sentences.



Scan the QR code to read the winning entries!



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WHY THEY GIVE

Since 2016, the **HOPE** (Hypertherm Owners' Philanthropic Endeavors) **Foundation** has generously supported CLiF's Year of the Book and Rural Library initiatives across the Upper Valley region of New Hampshire and Vermont. Their mission is to enrich associate owner communities as a catalyst for collaboration and compassion, inspiring solutions for sustainable, positive change.



"We are proud to support CLiF, as its programs empower local children and families to thrive while reinforcing our commitment to our Early Childhood strategic focus areas: parental confidence and youth resilience. When attending a Year of the Book launch, the smiles, and squeals of delight from the children are evidence of CLiF's impact."

— **Stacey Chiocchio**, Community Citizenship Manager