

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Read Across Oklahoma Returns with Free Book Giveaway and Both Live and Online Entertainment and Activities

Read Across Oklahoma, the state's premiere literacy event for preschool and early grade children, returns on Tuesday, April 12 from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. with a free book giveaway at the Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden. The first 1,000 children that day with paid Zoo admission or ZOOfriends membership pass will receive a free book and are invited to participate in a variety of interactive learning stations and special performances.

Families and classrooms participating virtually can visit the Oklahoma Department of Libraries (ODL) at libraries.ok.gov/read to enjoy a special video of children's author Dennis Mathew reading this year's featured book, *My Wild First Day of School*. Online visitors will also be treated to musical performances, storytelling, and a variety of activities. The video also provides a look at the OKC Zoo and some of its animals and habitats.

Read Across Oklahoma is part of the statewide My First Library program coordinated by ODL, an early literacy initiative that helps develop literacy skills and promotes family reading. During a regular school year, the program distributes 1,900 books to early learning classrooms each month.

"Children who are exposed to books and have books to call their own at an early age develop better vocabularies and are better prepared for school," Gelders said. "Getting books into the hands of young children is so important, and our partnership with the Zoo is another important avenue to help young children discover the wonderful world of books and reading."

"The Zoo is always excited to support Read Across Oklahoma," said Candice Rennels, OKC Zoo's director of public relations. "Seeing the animals at the zoo, taking home a book, and participating in activities that celebrate reading makes for a wonderful day of discovery for young children."

My Wild First Day of School, by Mustang author Dennis Mathew, is a great feature book for this year's event, Gelders said. "The animal characters in the story are excited about what they will accomplish during their first day of school. Characters identify different goals but they all want to do their best."

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The virtual side of the event provides opportunities for children and classrooms across Oklahoma to participate, Gelders said. “The online activities we provided during the pandemic proved to be very popular, and we wanted to continue this opportunity for young people to connect to the event no matter where they live in the state.”

Visit libraries.ok.gov/read to find the virtual activities. Families planning a visit to the Zoo can purchase their tickets in advance at www.okczoo.org/tickets. Families can also continue the reading adventure by visiting their local public library to find books and services for all ages.

Additional Read Across Oklahoma sponsors include Target, Tinker Federal Credit Union, Krueger Foundation, Institute of Museum and Library Services, Simply Country Ranch, Oklahoma Literacy Coalition, OKC Metro Literacy Coalition, Oklahoma City Public Schools, Teacher Prep Academy, Metro Technology Center, Metropolitan Library System, Junior League of Oklahoma City, Capitol Hill Graffix, and Pizza Hut.

For more information about Read Across Oklahoma, contact Katie.Bell@libraries.ok.gov or call 405-521-2034

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The **Oklahoma Department of Libraries** is the official State Library of Oklahoma. It serves the information and records management needs of state government, assists with public library development, coordinates library and information technology projects for the state, and serves the general public through its specialized collections.

The **Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden** is located at the crossroads of I-44 and I-35. The Zoo is a proud member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the American Alliance of Museums, Oklahoma City’s Adventure District and an Adventure Road partner. Hours of operation are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily with the last entry at 4:00 p.m. Regular admission is \$12 for adults and \$9 for children ages 3-11 and seniors ages 65 and over. Children two and under are admitted free. Visit okczoo.org for more information.

Dennis Mathew is an elementary school speech pathologist, singer-songwriter, and author. Through his music and books, including *Bello the Cello*, *My Wild First Day of School*, and *How Grizzly found Gratitude*, Dennis has reached tens of thousands of students worldwide. Visit his website at booksbydennis.com.