

# CLiF News

WINTER 2026



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*Dear Friends,*

During a recent conversation, an educator shared an observation that resonated deeply: **“Characters in books develop empathy in children in ways that no other teaching tool is able to provide.”**

This is why your support for CLiF means so much. Because of you, children across New Hampshire and Vermont have access to books and stories that help build compassion and understanding for others, qualities that are sorely needed in these turbulent times.

**Thank you for your continued belief in the power of literacy to change lives.** Our work would not be possible without your generosity.

In the pages that follow, you’ll find program stories, community highlights, updates and reflections from CLiF. You’ll learn about our expanded offerings for our littlest learners and their caregivers (page 6), meet our new board members (page 7), hear from our featured presenter (page 4), and more.

Over the months ahead, we look forward to hosting dynamic writing workshops, engaging family literacy events, and our annual Community Literacy Conference. If you would like to see CLiF in action at a school, library, or partner site, please do not hesitate to reach out. We would love to have you witness your impact firsthand.

**Wishing you warmth and peace,**

**Laura Rice**  
CLiF Executive Director

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## COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE: **Marilyn Taylor McDowell**

Years ago, I saw a CLiF display at a book festival when my debut novel, *Carolina Harmony*, was out in the world. Soon after, I became a CLiF presenter. I've been a youth librarian at three different libraries; each one a recipient of a CLiF grant. It's been over a decade now, and I truly feel kinship with the staff at CLiF and appreciate their dedication, kindness and compassion.

Danville is a close-knit community. The children here know me as Miss Marilyn. We first make each other's acquaintance through Storytime; then they grow and head off to school, but we still reconnect through library programs. Good friends. This is joy.

As a small, rural library, our resources are limited. Sometimes we don't have the books our young patrons want most. The last time this happened, I thought: *Maybe CLiF will help.* So I applied for a Rural Library grant and we were selected for 2025-26!

One of our challenges is helping families stay engaged with the library. Being a presence in our school is essential. We offer classroom visits, after-school activities and creative library programs. Partnering with our school librarian led to friendship and trust. CLiF gave us a powerful resource. This energy is like tossing a pebble into the center of a pond. It has a rippling effect, circles widening.

Here's an example: The Danville Fair begins with a parade. I wondered why the library wasn't showcased, and decided to change that. I envisioned a float, shared my idea and invited participation. Paint. Construct. Design. The evening before the parade, I found myself alone in a field with a trailer heaped with objects. Overwhelmed. *How will I ever put this together?* Unexpectedly, folks started showing up. Helping hands. **This is community.**



*Marilyn is an author, CLiF presenter, and the children's librarian at the Pope Memorial Library in Danville, VT.*



Over the course of her 30-year career as an award-winning naturalist, **Susie Spikol** has taught thousands of children, parents, and teachers and given hundreds of public talks at nature centers, schools, colleges, universities, libraries, and conferences. When not catching frogs with preschoolers, tracking bobcats with middle-schoolers, or hawk-watching with her own three children, Susie tucks away to time to write. Her most recent book is 2025's *Book of Fairies*.

**Q: You describe yourself as a “Writer, Naturalist, Educator.” Was this always the path you saw for yourself?**

**A:** I always wanted to be a writer. I wrote my first book when I was 8, about my fuzzy caterpillar friend.

**Q: How do you inspire children to write and journal?**

**A:** Giving children time to observe and explore the wild world, the writing/journaling comes naturally. With practice, encouragement, and modeling, kids rise to the occasion.

**Q: What’s a particularly memorable “kids in nature” experience you can share?**

**A:** *Pssshhhttt* for birds! *Pssshhhtttting* is a call you make that sounds like air coming out of a tire. Birds come to check it out. I love being with a group of kids, *pssshhhtttting*, and having curious birds fly close in, casting a spell over us.

**Q: In what ways can books and reading enhance a child’s experience in the natural world?**

**A:** Books inspire and model for children how to explore, take them deeper into a topic and helps them imagine ways of being they never considered.

**Q: What’s a simple activity or exercise families can do together to connect with nature & literacy at home?**

**A:** Go on a curiosity walk. Look for animals, notice colors, smells, sounds. Explore nooks and crannies. At home, create a collaborative journal page, with everyone writing, drawing, mapping, and contributing their discoveries to the page.

**Q: Any new projects, exciting events, or books coming out for 2026?**

**A:** Listen for the premier of the *Wild at Home* kids podcast on NHPR this fall and look for my *All Creature Small* essay in the 2027 Old Farmers Almanac. Fingers crossed that my newest book project will see the light of day!

**Q: How does one make friends with fairies?!**

**A:** Since fairies are guardians of the natural world, the more you give the Earth love and tender care, the more likely it is that a fairy will find you and favor you with their friendship.





*New reading material for young HLCC patrons*

## A Rural Library and More

The Highgate Library & Community Center (HLCC) in Highgate Center, VT is a small, but vibrant hub, with a wide range of programs and resources for all ages. More than a library, HLCC also serves as a food shelf, WiFi hotspot, and community center.

With the support of CLiF’s 2025-2026 Rural Library Grant, the library is working to transform the way their youngest patrons interact with stories. They have added new, high-quality titles to their permanent collection to keep young readers engaged. This funding strengthens ties with the local Highgate Elementary School, ensuring literacy support follows students from the classroom to the community. With additional funding the library will combine literacy with craft supplies and family events, to make reading an interactive, creative experience for the whole family.

## Community Ties

Burlington, VT-based nonprofit COTS is the recipient of an enhanced CLiF Community Literacy Grant, designed to expand access to books and literacy experiences for children and families experiencing housing instability.



Through this partnership, CLiF supports family storytelling events and free book giveaways at COTS’ Main Street Family Shelter and Main Street Family Housing in Burlington, along with the creation of welcoming literacy spaces for families.

As part of recent building improvements at Main Street Family Housing, a new community gathering space now includes an onsite library collection donated by CLiF. With COTS’ mission to provide emergency shelter, supportive services, and long-term housing for people in need proving more critical than ever, this collaboration allows CLiF to connect with children and families where they live and gather.

*A CLiF book giveaway at COTS Main Street Family Housing*

## Keeping up the Momentum

All CLiF Year of the Book grantees receive a follow-up Momentum Grant designed to sustain energy and enthusiasm into the following school year. Though smaller in size, Momentum Grants continue to deliver meaningful impact. Many schools choose to build on successful Year of the Book initiatives, turning them into cherished traditions that endure well beyond CLiF’s initial investment.

In 2025–26, Madison Elementary School (Madison, NH) invited author Natalie Kinsey-Warnock to return for another writing residency; Pleasant Street School (Laconia, NH) is repeating its highly popular “March Madness” reading challenge; and Charleston Community School (West Charleston, VT) is planning another whole-school field trip tied to classroom reading goals to increase excitement around reading.



*Natalie Kinsey-Warnock at Madison Elementary School*



## Starting Out Strong

In alignment with our current strategic plan, CLiF is deepening its investment in early literacy, with a focus on reaching more children from birth to age five, the critical years when the foundations for reading and writing are formed.

We know that children who grow up with books and stories in the home typically arrive at kindergarten better prepared to learn. For children who lack those resources, it is easy to fall behind from the very start. Because closing that gap becomes more difficult with each passing school year, there is real urgency to intervene as early as possible.

While early literacy is not new work for CLiF, we have launched a set of intentional, coordinated initiatives designed to expand our reach and impact with young children and their families.

- Last fall, CLiF introduced an Early Literacy Grant pilot in partnership with eight programs across Vermont and New Hampshire, including family centers, preschools, public libraries, and community organizations. Each partner received \$2,500 in new books, event funding, and literacy resources to support early learning and family engagement.
- Both the Early Literacy Grant and the Rural Library Grant now include early literacy backpack kits filled with books, games, and hands-on activities for families to enjoy together. Each 2025-2026 Rural Library partner received three themed kits, along with 50 board books to distribute in ways that best meet local needs.
- CLiF has also significantly expanded the number of preschool-aged children reached through the Year of the Book grant. In 2025–2026, 267 pre-K students are being served, compared to 86 the previous year. These students will continue to benefit as they enter kindergarten through CLiF’s follow-up Momentum Grant at their schools.
- CLiF is partnering with Vermont’s Parent Child Centers through their Welcome Baby program to place books directly into the hands of new parents and promote the benefits of reading aloud from birth.
- To support caregivers who may feel less confident sharing books and stories, CLiF is revising its Caregiver Literacy Resource Guide for families with children from birth to age three, emphasizing practical, accessible strategies for building literacy into everyday routines.

Through these expanded efforts across New Hampshire and Vermont, CLiF is committed to providing equitable access to early literacy resources and helping to ensure our youngest learners get a strong start.

## COMING UP FOR CLIF

**SAVE THE DATE:** The annual CLiF Community Literacy Conference will take place Thursday, March 26 at the Fireside Inn in West Lebanon, NH. We are thrilled to welcome bestselling author/illustrator and National Book Award finalist **Jarrett K. Krosoczka** as our keynote speaker for this event. Please visit our website for more information and to register.



## ETERNITY

**NEW LOOK:** CLiF has partnered with Burlington-based web design firm Eternity to update our online presence. The refreshed site will make it easier to explore our programs, learn about our impact, and stay connected to our work. Look for the launch of our shiny new digital home in early 2026!

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



As two of our longest-serving volunteers, **Margaret** and **David Luce** have many collective years of CLiF experience under their belts.

A former pediatric home health nurse, Margaret witnessed firsthand how many children were growing up without books in their homes. Volunteering at CLiF “sounded like a great way to introduce so many children to books,” she recalls. Her favorite thing about volunteering is seeing children’s “shy and happy smiles” as they choose new books to keep.

David remembers that he didn’t read much as a child, in part because he didn’t have access to many age-appropriate reading materials. He is inspired by the variety of books CLiF distributes, and the fact that children receive them for free. “Books today for young people are so much fun and the artwork is amazing!”



Scan the QR code to read our full interview with the Luces!

## WELCOME A-BOARD

We are thrilled to welcome four new members to CLiF’s Board of Directors.

### Anda M. Adams

Anda currently works as the Chief Academic Officer for the White River Valley Supervisory Union, which serves students and families in schools across ten central Vermont towns. She is the board secretary of the North Country Camps Foundation, which runs the outdoor-focused summer camp she attended and worked at in the Adirondacks. Anda grew up in Connecticut, earned degrees from Brown, Georgetown, and Harvard, and lived in both Washingtons before happily settling in Vermont with her family to read, explore, and raise chickens.



### Emilie Christie Burack



Emilie Christie Burack lives in rural New Hampshire where she writes novels and picture books for children. Her award-winning debut novel, *The Runaway’s Gold* (Abrams/Amulet), was selected to represent New Hampshire at the National Book Festival. After a marketing career in professional tennis, she is now a frequent visiting author at schools and served many years as a trustee of her local library. Emilie earned her A.B. at Mount Holyoke College and M.F.A. in Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is the co-founder and President of the New Hampshire Book Festival, an annual event that brings authors together with readers to celebrate literacy, community, and conversation.

### John Gosselin

John Gosselin is an attorney, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. His law practice focuses on estate and trust planning, real estate law, and fiduciary services. He has held leadership and advisory roles with several Boston-area nonprofit organizations. An active Middlebury College alumnus, John is particularly committed to supporting Vermont nonprofits that serve low-income communities and expand access to educational resources. He is a longtime supporter of CLiF and is honored to serve on its Board of Directors.



### Hillary Read



Hillary Read is a native Vermonter and marketing consultant, with a background in creative writing and journalism. Hillary was a sportswriter for the *Burlington (VT) Free Press* and a sports copy editor for the *Boston Globe*. She graduated from Harvard with a degree in English; she has also spent time in New Mexico as an artist-in-residence (fiction writing) at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos, NM. She currently serves as Board Chair of the Young Writers Project.



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## Why They Give: Kids Who Care

**Claire DeSorgher**, a 7th grader at St. Albans City School, participated in her school's CLIF Year of the Book program during the 2023–2024 school year. Motivated to give back, Claire sold handmade crafts at a kids' farmers market over the summer and contributed her earnings, along with part of her Vermont Youth Council stipend, to support CLIF's work.



**Zoey Clopton** is the co-founder, alongside her mom, Cara, of VT Princess Party, which brings imaginative, princess-themed entertainment to children's events across Chittenden County. Inspired by CLIF's work with young readers across Vermont and New Hampshire, Zoey donated a portion of her profits to support the mission. This spring, she will compete in the Miss Vermont Teen pageant, where her community service initiative, *SPOTlight: Stories Promote Our Togetherness*, highlights the power of sharing stories to build connection and belonging.

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CLIF is grateful to our generous donors of all ages! If you are looking for a way to give back, we are always happy to answer any questions, and discuss options. Please contact Laura Rice: [laura@clifonline.org](mailto:laura@clifonline.org), 802-244-0146.