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North Hastings Public Library launches ?Mystery Bags? initiative

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

North Hastings Public Library unveiled a new initiative on their Facebook page on March 9 called ?Mystery Bags.? The idea, according to the library's events coordinator Natalie Phillips, is to follow the NHPL's March theme ?Whodunnit? by providing a mystery bag full of books, with patrons not knowing what books are in them until they get home. It also spurs people into trying out new book genres and book authors. The bags are available by donation and all proceeds go toward funding the library's programs.

Natalie Phillips is the new events coordinator at NHPL, and says she absolutely loves working at the library.

?I have been there for a couple of months now and it's been great. This new job incorporates organizing, planning and being creative, all things I love. The library also has an amazing staff! They are just wonderful people to work with,? she says.

Phillips says that she's made several posts on Facebook in regard to National Days since she started at NHPL. She has posted about Family Literacy Day, Black History Month, and she put together a reading challenge for kids aged five to 12 years for National Reading Month this month. She says that part of her job is to be a presence on social media to help promote the library and its collection, as well as what it going on at the library.

Consequently, she has come up with themes for any given month and reading materials to go along with it. For example, February has Valentine's Day and Family Day so she promoted books about love and family with the theme ?Straight from the Heart.?

March's theme is ?Whodunit,? and its all about a good mystery, which brought her to the idea of the mystery bags.

?I came up with the idea for the mystery bags after a discussion I had with my boss. We have many books that have either been donated to the library or pulled from the collection that are on sale right now. Due to lockdowns and restrictions, sales have slowed down. What better way to start them back up than with a hint of mystery? It also fits well into the theme for March,? she says.

Phillips says the Mystery Bags each have either five or six books inside and are grouped based on age and genre. For example, young adult and the genre is all fantasy books, or adult and the genre is romance. For the more adventurous, some of the bags are just labelled fiction and have a mixture of romance, westerns, mystery, etc. The idea of the bags is to encourage patrons to have fun and step outside their comfort zone and try a new genre or new author. Patrons won't know what they're getting until they get home

and open up their bags. Phillips says that there are even mystery bags for kids, from kindergarten to grade five.

?I only just promoted the Mystery Bags on March 9, so I am hoping that patrons will like the idea and want to purchase a mystery bag and help support the library,? she says.

Kimberly McMunn is the CEO and head librarian of the NHPL, and says the book bag idea was in place since early in the pandemic. She says that Phillips came on board and rebranded the idea with the mystery theme.

?I think it will be a big hit with our summer crowd, assuming we will have a summer crowd,? she says.

According to McMunn, they are also exploring other forms of programming that are safe to do with the ongoing pandemic. Things like ?take and make? crafts, but she says they are hard on the budget so will not be a regular feature.

?We will likely revisit sharing fun activities on Instagram, but we are still looking at something we can offer at the library. So many are screen fatigued and there is a big market out there, with bigger tech budgets, to compete against. Natalie is full of ideas, and we just need to figure out how to make them work with current social distancing rules and our tiny program budget,? she says.

To spur enthusiasm for St. Patrick's Day, the NHPL is running a St. Patrick's Day contest, which they advertised on their Facebook page on March 16. If you buy a mystery bag from March 17 to March 31, and you find a lucky pin in your bag, you'll win one of four prizes. First prize is the Game of Thrones series of novels by George R.R. Martin, second prize are two novels by John Grisham, third prize is a novel by Louise Penny, and lastly fourth prize is a novel by Stephen King. To purchase your mystery bag by donation, and possibly win a prize, you can visit the library from Tuesday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

All proceeds from mystery bag sales go towards NHPL programs. As for any future social media initiatives and activities at the NHPL, Phillips advises people to keep an eye on the library's Instagram page, their Facebook page and the library website at www.northhastingslibrary.ca.