From the Heart: Tales of Librarianship

As part of our Celebrate Libraries campaign, we asked school and public librarians to submit personal stories about the impact libraries have made on their lives or on the lives of others. We received more than 100 thoughtful submissions. Here is a collection of some of our favorites.

“The library is the cornerstone of the community because it provides a place where anyone can access information to make their lives more complete.”

— Claire Crawford, Director
Geneseo Public Library District | Geneseo, Illinois
Some librarians realize their destinies at a young age...

My first memory of books and reading was around the age of three as I watched my grandmother read daily the scriptures and the newspaper. Her enthusiasm for reading inspired me to become an avid reader as well. A family tradition was to visit the public library every Sunday after church. I would excitedly read as many books as possible during our time there. I loved interacting with the library staff as well. The way that they talked about the books and the way that they handled them for circulation and shelving was so impressive. In fact, I was so impressed by the library staff that around age eight I began pretending to be a librarian. I would set up a table in the life-size dollhouse that my grandfather built for me. Then, friends would come over to play and I would pretend to circulate materials (books, sticks, rocks, etc.) to them. Fast-forward a few decades, and I became a real librarian (library media specialist) just like the ones I admired so much as a child. My full-circle revelation has been achieved.

– LaNell A. Gill, Library Media Specialist
Whitefish Bay Middle School | Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin
I fell in love with books as a young child in my home country, Argentina. Libraries were underfunded or didn’t exist altogether, so access to books was almost exclusively through purchases. When I moved to the USA, my first visit to a public library was to the Bellevue Regional Library, part of the King County Library System. That day I fell in love with libraries and soon after decided that becoming a librarian was my lifelong dream. Almost 20 years later and after having two children and while living in Canada, I completed my MLIS at McGill University. Today, I am a public school librarian fighting for funding to bring literature and information to my almost 1,000 students. They need and deserve to have access to information and literature. I am living my dream.

—Karina Kawaguchi, Librarian
Chinook Middle School | Bellevue, Washington
My library story is actually about my hometown library in Huron, Ohio, a town of 7,000. I loved that library from the time I was a child. My parents took us there regularly, and I became a page when I turned 16. The director could see my passion, and encouraged it. When I left for college, one sister became a page, and when she graduated, the youngest became a page. A year after grad school, I went back to that library as Library Director. I met my husband at the Huron Public Library, and we were married in the meeting room there. The staff tied paperback books to the bumper of the car. I still return to the Huron Public Library with my mother when I go to visit.

– Lesa Holstine, Collection Development Manager
Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library | Evansville, Indiana
When I was in middle school and high school, I always felt like the way in which a library was organized was written in a language that I did not know how to read. No one had taught me how to use a library, and I assumed they were all organized in a similar way. When I couldn't find something, I assumed the fault was with me and that I would look silly asking for help. After I got to college and realized that this was not the case at all — that libraries were organized differently based on many factors and that asking a librarian for help was considered part of the experience — I wished that someone had "let me in on the secret" a bit sooner. After spending a few years teaching and realizing how students struggled with the research experience and many teachers struggled to teach research well, I decided to get my library degree. I have enjoyed teaching students how libraries work and how librarians can help with research for six years now. I hope that my students will feel confident in their learning endeavors as they move past middle school and see the library and librarian — as a source of help and information.

— Angela Green, Librarian
Battle Ground Academy Middle School
Franklin, Tennessee
I was the fourth child born to parents who were dirt-poor in a small South Texas town. My mother dropped out of high school in ninth grade. My dad finished high school and went to work on the railroad to provide for a young, growing family. A girl and then two boys came along in quick succession, and I followed after four years. So my young, uneducated mother struggled to raise four young children on almost no money. The one gift my mother gave us, without ever knowing it was a gift, was a love of reading. She always had a book by her bedside, and I remember always seeing her read. I know now she read to escape an extremely hard life. Those books by her bedside were Harlequin romances, but that didn’t matter. I saw her reading, and I modeled that behavior.

We always had books in our house. We didn’t have “The Hardy Boys” or “Nancy Drew.” We couldn’t afford them. We had a knock-off series called “The Happy Hollisters.” I didn’t know it wasn’t the real thing. I loved those books. My favorite, though, was an old, dusty copy with mold on the cover of “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.” I didn’t even know who C.S. Lewis was or that there were six more books in that wonderful series. I was Lucy, the youngest of four, and I spent my childhood escaping regularly into Narnia, hanging out with Mr. Tumnus, being scared to death of The White Witch, and learning how you could love and be terrified all at once of your hero when Aslan made his appearance toward the end of the novel.

One of my favorite summer memories is of Mama taking us to the public library every two weeks. My town’s claim to fame is that it is the home of Vice President John Nance Garner. The library was in Garner’s mansion on a pecan tree-lined
street in a part of town that was built with old money. The only reason I would ever have had to go to any of those stately old mansions was because Garner’s home now held the town museum downstairs and the library upstairs. I loved looking through the museum, which had on display a beautiful fringed cowgirl dress that had belonged to another one-time resident of our town: Dale Evans. I would dream of being a cowgirl movie star, and then trek upstairs to check out biographies of my heroines: Annie Oakley and Amelia Earhart. When I was younger, I would check out the most magical picture books about Raggedy Ann and Andy. My mom or big sister would read those books to me, and I would get lost in the lush illustrations by Johnny Gruelle and dream of drinking root beer floats from a tree.

When it was time to leave the library, we would walk out on the lush, green, carpet grass lawn, and sometimes John Nance Garner himself, now in his 90s, would be sitting on a lawn chair. Sometimes he would be whittling away at a piece of wood, and other times he would be shelling pecans. But he was always available for a conversation and would sometimes retreat to his living quarters and come back with popsicles for the kids.

When I look back at my childhood, there is no doubt in my mind that books saved my life. My brothers both dropped out of high school and struggled all their lives. One died at age 40 and one at 48, both of alcohol-related causes. Alcoholism ran rampant in my family, but I was lucky enough not to have inherited that gene, I guess. But my sister and I went on to college and dedicated our lives as teachers to helping young people. I got a master’s degree, worked as a marriage and family therapist, an English and theater arts teacher, and finally a librarian. My life has been happy and my work fulfilling and rewarding. When I look back and ask what was different, I can point directly at one thing: BOOKS. I always read, and reading always helped me transcend my current situation. Reading gave me understanding, compassion and true empathy, and helped me learn how to really get into others’ skin and see what their world was like. Reading opened the world to me. Reading saved my life. No wonder I became a librarian.

—Virginia Bigler, Library Media Specialist
Harlan High School | San Antonio, Texas
We had a special education student as a volunteer. She was quiet and shy at first and tried so very hard to do her job. We told her to just take her time and do her best. As she grew more confident and comfortable with us, we noticed her work and conversational skills improve. By the end of the year, she was proficient not only at her job, but also in her ability to interact with others. She graduated, moved out of state, but still kept in touch with us. She continued her schooling and got a job as a teaching assistant in a special education program in her new location. We like to think we helped make that possible.

– Margaret Heidtbrink, Hoffman Estates High School Library
Hoffman Estates, Illinois
My first year as a media specialist I had a student who would come in every day during lunch. The first couple of times he came in, he would put his head down. I let him know that he could not sleep in the library and asked if he had anything to work on. The third time this happened, I decided to take a couple of books over to the young man and suggest he try them out. He looked them over and selected one. From that day forward, he started coming in and reading each day, and he eventually finished that first book and asked for another one. We started talking a little each day so I could get to know him and make better recommendations. I found out he was a senior and in danger of not graduating. As we talked more, he began to reveal that he had the opportunity to graduate if he completed online classes but did not feel motivated. I encouraged him to work on his classes in the library before and after school. His reading teacher also helped him and encouraged him to work whenever he had the chance. He ended up graduating and came back the next year to thank his reading teacher, and he let me know that my interest in him and willingness to listen motivated him to try.

— Jessica Reid, Media Specialist
Braden River High School | Bradenton, Florida
Our library brings students together for reading, research and service learning. We recently received a 3D printer through a grant, and students have been designing and printing everything from keychains to fidget spinners. A few students decided they wanted to use this new technology to make a difference, and we have been volunteering with Enabling the Future (e-NABLE), printing pre-designed prosthetic hands for distribution to children around the world. Building on this experience, our students are now researching, designing and 3D printing a custom prosthetic hand for a member of our community. This project is transforming the lives of all involved.

– Renee Rogers, Librarian | Steinert High School
Hamilton, New Jersey
We have a few regulars in our computer area. One lady had been coming to use our computers for months, if not close to a year. At first she was very hesitant and unsure when applying for jobs, using Office and the like. After working with her over those months she became much more fluent and confident using technology. She stopped by again one day, but this time not to use the computer. She simply wanted to thank us for all that we had done to help her. After months of searching and applying, she finally landed a job. In just a couple days she would be moving out of state but wanted to say "Goodbye" and "Thanks" to the library staff for making a difference.

– Ryan Johnson, Assistant Director
O'Fallon Public Library | O'Fallon, Illinois
Our library has turned into more than simply a resource for books for one of our regular patrons. She normally came in to browse for books and attended our monthly book club. Our book club often selected titles that made you think about different topics or cultures. She always said that she never would have picked up the titles we chose, but she always enjoyed what she learned from reading them, even when she didn’t necessarily enjoy the book in and of itself. Her husband used to join her at the library to use the computers. Sadly, he passed away last year. We had gotten to know her so well that we shared in her sorrow, and it only seemed right to send a sympathy note to her. She was very touched by this, and during her initial grieving period, she often came in just to be around people and not be alone at home. We became a refuge for her in a sense. She started coming to our monthly adult crafting program and made new friends there. She is always excited to talk about the library and our programs and has become an advocate for us. Considering this, she will be attending a strategic planning session for patrons to provide input on what they would like to see from the library. When you reach out and really get to know your patrons, they can almost seem like family.

– Joan Dudzinski, Collection Support Supervisor
Forsyth County Public Library | Cumming, Georgia
Our library is not just a place to find books or to use computers. Our library is a home for so many students who are trying to find themselves. A place for them to explore different ideas, a place to find solace among daily chaos, a place to discover and share. The students realize these attributes and solicit them with great purpose and poise. Libraries truly are the best places to be!

– David Brichacek, Librarian | Enterprise High School
Redding, California
Who will you inspire today?