

I Love My Librarian!

2015 Award

Nominee: Diane Brown
Stetson Branch Library
New Haven, Connecticut

Nominator: Dawn La Valle

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award.

Recently when a Stetson Branch Library Building focus group was asked what popped into their mind first when asked why they love the Stetson Library, the unanimous answer was "Miss Diane." Branch Manager Diane Brown is the heart of the Stetson Branch Library and the heart of an urban community burdened with a high poverty and high crime rate who overcame many obstacles in her own life to transform the Stetson Branch Library into a community hub beloved by all. Diane is a recipient of the Bill and Melinda Gates Fellowship Award which set her on the course to becoming a librarian.

2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and made your experience.

Diane inspires me because she is a community activist librarian concerned with how she and the library can impact and meet the needs of the Dixwell community. While so many libraries are struggling to build lasting partnerships with local schools, Diane took the challenge and turned it into an opportunity working closely with CONNCAT (CT Center for Arts and Technology) Executive Director, to assist with program design and facilitation of an after school tutoring programs at the Lincoln Bassett School (K-8). Lincoln Bassett School was on the "low performing list" in the district and was "adopted" by CONNCAT whose mission is to inspire, motivate, and prepare youth and adults for educational and career advancement, through after-school arts, and job training programming. Not only does Diane work closely with this program, she helped establish a Stetson Library satellite library within the school. She created "Family Night Programs" in response to a lack of funding for programming this particular program inspired families to spend time together in the evenings. She was able to offer a Civil Rights Forum, Youth Against Violence, a Black history program, family game night, a health fair all without a program budget through collaboration with community organizations who subsidized these programs.

3. How has the librarian made a difference in the community? Please be specific.

The Stetson Branch Library of the New Haven Free Public Library located in the Dixwell neighborhood, serves a predominantly African American community burdened by low literacy, high poverty and high crime. Diane ensured that the Stetson Branch Library was not only a safe place but a place of learning and development. Diane's commitment to the community has resulted in her being awarded the Start Community Bank – Community Services Award; the City of New Haven – Commission on Equal opportunities – Community Service Award and the Festival of Arts and Ideas/Teach Them While They are Young – Key to “Dixwell Neighborhood” award. The latter award was the result of Diane's commitment to the community serving as the Coordinator for the International Festival of Arts and Ideas, “Pop-Up” Festival in the Dixwell neighborhood. This collaborative effort brings the entire neighborhood and the City of New Haven together in an extravaganza of performing arts, lectures and conversations. Diane has also hosted the Yale School of Medicine's annual health aimed at educating the community on an array of health issues. She has also hosted a community cookout/meet and greet with the Yale University, African Fellowship Program where Africans representing 22 countries share a fun filled day interacting with the black community. When the “Teach Them While They are young” initiative coordinators were seeking space to provide educational and development programming for youth, Diane provided and scheduled space for full day programs at Stetson on Saturdays. During the Season of Giving, Diane collaborates with the New Haven Police Department, the New Haven Fire Department and local churches to provide programming, and donations of clothing, food and school supplies for families in need. Diane and community are one in the same - she is community.

4. How has the library, and the nominee, improved the quality of your life?

Diane's energy and commitment to the Stetson Branch library has improved the quality of life for so many Dixwell residents, it would be difficult to quantify or qualify. The response of community members when she walks into a room is incredible. She goes above and beyond to help patrons and non patrons receive help, information on services, cultural programming, literacy education, simple everyday needs and complex answers to questions. Urban libraries can be challenging from diminished funding, limited resources, the lack of black librarians, but Diane is the exception instead of giving up she does everything within her power to ensure her patrons receive excellent service from focused collections, re-thinking of space, relevant programming all achieved through excellent leadership and the development of strategic partnerships. Her commitment to the community she was born and raised is unbreakable, and it goes well beyond the walls of the library. It is not just a matter of "doing" it is understanding being completely engaged and entrenched in her commitment. Diane has an incredible depth of knowledge of the history and social demographics of the neighborhood which influences how she provides services and allocates resources. The community outreach initiatives Diane has integrated into daily operations have touched so many lives, from kids to adults. It is easy to say that someone has an impact on one's life, you can go into any library receive help, leave the library and say yes "that person impacted my life" but the difference with Diane is that she is imbedded in the community, her community to which she has a lifelong commitment and that is what sets her apart from others. She walks the walk and talks the talk.

5. How does the nominee make the library a better place?

When Diane was named the Branch Manager in 2006, she transformed an unruly, challenging branch library into a "village" creating an environment where all members of the community could share a safe, warm, and nurturing space. This seemingly daunting task was achieved as the clear result of Diane's labor of love and her perseverance in developing sustained partnerships with the police department, civic and fraternal organizations, neighborhood schools, community church leaders, community volunteers, educators and library administration. The branch library is an oasis in an area suffering from neglect, gang activity, poverty and low literacy or as one young patron stated "it is the only place I feel safe". When you walk into the branch it is a welcoming place to study, read, learn, network and for the younger patrons - a place simply to be a kid. Stetson is a reflection of the community in so many ways from the focus of the collections, to the art displays to the programming all as the result of Diane and her staff's understanding of the needs of the community.

I could go on and on, but in reality it is very simple Diane Brown makes the Stetson Branch Library of the New Haven Free Public Library a better place by just being there. Without Diane, the library would be a shell without the life and energy she injects everyday. Her leadership, passion and dedication is why the Stetson Branch Library is a valuable community asset.