



I Love My  
Librarian!  
2015 Award

**Nominee: Sylvia Cieply**  
**Otto A. Fischer School**  
**Orange, California**

**Nominator: Dave Busch**

**1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets him/her apart?**

Sylvia Cieply, my nominee, started here in December 2010, taking over the library at Otto A. Fischer School, inside Orange County Juvenile Hall. Sylvia handled her new assignment with aplomb; bringing nine years of experience to the program.

The first credentialed teacher librarian to run the library program, her quest to bring a love of reading is quixotic considering our student body. Her vision for the library has transformed the collection into one that not only reflects their experience but broadens their thinking and exposes them to positive choices they may not have considered.

The collection has been updated to include a variety of faiths and philosophies; money management; career and college choices; LGBT themes; travel; art and YA series. Ms. Cieply doesn't just try to give the students the books they want but provides the books they don't know they want until they see them.

**2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?**

It is in the Recreational Reading Program where Sylvia's influence is most evident. She is sensitive to the fact that while this is a public school library requiring material that is age appropriate, the students may be drug users and felons. Many are already parents.

Everything seems appropriate to them and it is a little too late for cautionary tales.

Incarcerated youth patrons are a complex mixture with a wide variety of abilities. Their exposure to reading is often limited. Many are here because of their histories: poverty, drug use, neglect, incarcerated family members. Reading, school and library visits were never a priority in their lives. Sylvia is adept at finding appropriate, appealing material, which stimulates the students into becoming lifelong learners and recreational readers.

No matter the size of the population, Sylvia has a good grasp of all the students' points of reference and so is able to not only fulfill their requests but lure them to appropriate levels of challenge.

Recognizing the need students have to read books that reflect their experience, she searches for what she calls “gateway books” to hook reluctant readers, including gang and prison memoirs like *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez, *True Notebooks* by Mark Salzman, *A Question of Freedom* by R. Dwayne Betts and *Two Badges* by Mona Ruiz as well as urban fiction by authors like Paul Volponi and Matt de la Pena is one key to her success.

Sylvia has fought for funding, arranging book signings to benefit the library. Some of our students might be here for years; others are in and out multiple times. Those here briefly often tag, “plaque” (carve into), or steal the library books. While talking to groups of students she encourages buy-in to the program and a sense of shared responsibility they hadn’t considered before. Students often say, “I never read until I got locked-up.”

### **3. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.**

Ms. Cieply elevates the library to a high level multi-cultural, multi-agency venue. Professional growth training, speaker forums, honors roll luncheons, collaborative agency meetings, potluck celebrations, and of course the casual visitations by faculty make for a warm and inviting environment. Music relaxes the nervous and energizes the sluggish. Technology is up to date and supports all the stakeholders in the library.

Working in a juvenile hall school requires great flexibility. Student visits to the library are cancelled and rescheduled due to fights, court visits, and security incidents. Her student helpers may or may not be escorted to the library because of these same concerns. The same is true of the school staff. Testing, security training, and meetings might be scheduled at a moment’s notice. The continuous depletion of the collection by theft and damage, not to mention heavy wear and tear, requires her constant attention. Yet she keeps the library well organized and can locate materials innately. Sylvia can be depended upon to roll with these changes and respond positively.

In addition and perhaps most importantly, Ms. Cieply treats the students with kindness, respect and humor. While she understands that their criminal behavior brought them here, she also sees them as individuals with struggles: mental illness, drug abuse, a family history of gang involvement, neglect and more. They are, after all, minors and one day they will be part of our communities and should be with a measure of understanding.

### **4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?**

With our population, finding material that interests students is not easy given that a topic may not have a book at the student’s reading level or in their primary language. Making the effort to locate a resource that fits the student’s needs is something on which she prides herself. Many of our students reject learning because school isn’t “their thing.” When Sylvia provides a resource for such a student, she opens a door for that student to (re)enter the learning process and increase their academic success.

Sylvia’s devotion to the library program is evident. She treats the students with warmth and humor. Her accessibility and demeanor lowers filters to their academic experience or process. Another teacher, Maria Martinez, said, “It has been so exciting to see students that had limited reading abilities suddenly reach for books on the shelf or book cart that would have been beyond their reading level at one point. I also recall one particular

student that became such an avid reader that decided that he wanted to be a writer and even wrote several chapters of his first book!"

Authors are invited into the hall by Ms. Cieply to speak to the students, most recently the YA author Alan Lawrence Sitomer. He shared honor roll luncheon with the female awardees and spoke to two groups in the library. She strives to provide exposure to horizons beyond their neighborhoods. When not shelving or processing new books, her student helpers watch classic films Sylvia gets from her public library. She sees it as exposure to a unique art form, enhancing their cultural literacy. Titles are as varied as Rear Window, Harold and Maude, It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, and Casablanca. But their favorites always seem to be the Marx Brothers' films.

##### **5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?**

Sylvia has raised the awareness of the recreational reading program and its importance in learning among school and probations staff. Teachers are encouraged to read from the collection so they can better help students with selection. Probation staff is also encouraged to read, borrow DVDs for the students to view in their units, and help with the collection and distribution of materials. They are appreciative of the process, its benefits, and Sylvia's efforts.

As the only credentialed Teacher Librarian, Ms. Cieply also oversees the collection development of other sites in our administrative unit at the request of Title I. Our students are between twelve and twenty. The schools were ordering material that was objectionable and the clerks overseeing the libraries at these schools had no process for review in place. Sylvia reads reviews, both from professional journals and customers online. If that doesn't give her a clear picture, she frequently gets books from the Los Angeles County Public library and reads them to determine their suitability.