

# I Love My Librarian!

Award

Elizabeth Moreau Nicolai  
Youth Services Coordinator  
Anchorage Public Library  
Anchorage, Alaska

**Nominated by:** Linda Klein and Clare Ross

Having worked in libraries since a teenager, Elizabeth Nicolai is an enthusiastic and passionate advocate for libraries. She always knew she would be a librarian, and this dedication shines through in her role as a Youth Services Librarian, department manager, and a local and national library leader. She cares deeply about making sure the library is there for the kids in our community who need it the most. Her passion for equitable programming and collections have helped shape the library's goals of inclusion and service to the entire community. Her partnerships have expanded our library's offerings in STEM, literacy, and the arts, bringing the community to the library, and bridging community needs with the library's unique offerings. As she began to take on management duties, in recognition of her burgeoning leadership abilities, she was selected as an ALA Emerging Leader in 2010. She served on the 2012 Newbery Award Committee, was Chair of the Youth Services Roundtable of the Alaska Library Association, and founded Alaska Books for Alaska Kids—a group of librarians, authors, and children's literature professors to build a website and database to showcase the best in Alaskan literature for kids. She also serves as Programs Chair of the Alaska Library Association's annual conference.

In November 2018, Anchorage suffered a 7.0 magnitude earthquake. Once we had the OK that we could resume letting the public in the main library, Elizabeth was quick to set up daily programs in the week immediately following the quake. Anchorage schools were closed due to heavy damage, so many parents and teachers expressed gratitude for the fun and educational programs we offered in a safe place.

This ability to be quickly responsive became crucial in mid-March as the library closed its doors due to the pandemic. Elizabeth immediately started working with her team to offer services to the children of the community. In addition to weekly virtual storytimes which have been well-attended, she initiated "Programs-to-Go", weekly programs of materials are offered to anyone to pick up via our curbside service. These programs are STEAM-friendly activities for all ages. These kits were the breakout hit of the summer – we gave out over 1,500 packets in June alone! Parents expressed gratitude that they had something educational and fun for kids to do that were offline options. One parent said her child played with the "coffee filter butterfly" activity all day long, and she was looking forward to getting a new kit

next week. From another pleased patron: “Yesterday I picked up some books on hold, and since I had my grandchildren with me, I was offered the activity packet. This rainy morning my grandkids are enjoying the bug identification kit and pouring over the Beneficial Insects and Spiders of Alaska Booklet. That you included a hand lens was an unexpected bonus. During these months of library closure, I so appreciate having engaging resources for my grandchildren. Many thanks to you and your staff for making our summer a little brighter.”

She helped set up the procedure for supporting APL’s curbside services and the “Personal Librarian” service and coordinates the Youth Services portion of the service. The Personal Librarian, in essence, browses the stacks for patrons based on their requests for materials on certain subjects or based on reading levels. Youth materials are the most requested items by far. One patron commented, “Thank you so much Elizabeth, my two sons were so excited when I picked up our books curbside today! We can’t wait to read these ones and order another pick-up. Thank you so much for offering this service and allowing the children to keep reading!” Another grateful patron said, “My family and I have checked out many more books than usual in the past few months, and we were already avid readers. My kids also are really enjoying the activity kits, and the personal librarian service has introduced us all to new favorites. From the bottom of our hearts (and our burgeoning to-be-read piles), thank you so much for helping create a respite and a refuge for our wearied spirits and minds.”

Elizabeth made sure Youth Services was included in the application for CARES COVID relief funding. With a very short turnaround window, she spent \$15,000 on 3,500 free children’s books to give away in the community, recognizing that many children don’t have access to books during their school closures. She is currently working with community partners to safely deliver books to the community.

Literacy is paramount in Elizabeth’s goals for the library. She therefore made some exciting changes to our summer reading program, rebranding it “Summer Discovery.” Not only are kids (and adults) asked to track reading minutes, but they can also track optional family learning activities they do throughout the summer. This has greatly improved the completion rate for participants in the program. In 2019, we saw an increase from 21% the previous year, to 28% total completed logs returned. In our target group of elementary students, we saw a whopping increase from 19% to 31%, well above the national average!

Considering her overall goal of improving literacy in Anchorage, Elizabeth spearheaded a spectacular project that was a years-long effort: to get a public library card in the hands of every student enrolled in Anchorage School District. Each year since she launched the program, over 90% of parents have opted in for their children to receive a library card when they register them for school. She had to work with the school district, IT experts, and the joint library consortium to make this happen. This took a lot of time and effort on her part and has paid off big time.

As the mother of two tribally enrolled Native Alaska children, she brings a much-needed perspective to our library’s services and resources. Her experiences in this area have helped propel Anchorage Public Library to more discussions and action toward respect and honor for the many cultures in Anchorage. Anchorage has the most diverse neighborhood in America, the Mountain View area, and Elizabeth

served as the branch manager for the Mountain View Branch Library for some years, as well as serving on the Mountain View Community Council. She also served on the Board of Alaska Common Ground, an organization that focuses on Alaska's public policy issues. She led the effort for a "Yup'ik Storytime" based on many community requests. Several multigenerational families that spoke Yup'ik attended. One family that came brought their child they had just adopted. The child is Yup'ik, which language they don't speak, so they were very excited about the opportunity to introduce him to the language.

Not only does Elizabeth work to serve the community of Anchorage; she also provides materials and leadership to all libraries statewide in her initiatives, free of charge. She recognizes that many of the small libraries in Alaska lack adequate resources, and even fulltime staff. For example, she applied for and received a grant to create "Books Get Our Vote," a program that encouraged children to vote for their favorite book character. This program was shared with Alaska libraries statewide. She also shares other program materials such as our summer reading activity logs and our "1,000 Books Before Kindergarten" materials. When creating these materials, she used her community connections to hire local artists to create logos and other materials for these programs. Incidentally, Elizabeth was the driving force behind creating the "1,000 Books" program.

Elizabeth is an innovator whose responsiveness to community needs is evidenced by the overwhelming attendance at many popular programs, regularly breaking attendance records year after year. The kickoff to the summer reading program, "Reading Rendezvous," had over 3,100 attendees in 2019. Also, in 2019, Harry Potter Day (1,800 attendees), Dino Day (750 attendees), and Noon Year's Eve (1,300 attendees) were immensely popular, and each drew many new people to the library. The first "Harry Potter Day" in 2018 was planned for 150-200 people. When social media started to blow up, she quickly had to pivot and make plans for over 1,500 attendees within a couple of days! She understands that people want to have a free, safe, and fun place for their children and has made many positive improvements to the physical spaces for children in the library.

Anchorage Public Library was one of six libraries nationwide selected for Project Build, a partnership between Space Science Institute's National Center for Interactive Learning. Elizabeth applied for and received a grant to implement programming in partnership with the American Society of Civil Engineers, and \$10,000 to create circulating STEM Kits. Elizabeth took the lead on this project and was able to create dozens of highly popular STEM kits for the community. This went above and beyond just purchasing materials for the kits. She created unique content that corresponded the Anchorage School Districts science standards. These kits have proved so popular, she has been able to solicit more funds from the community and build even more kits. Caregivers love these materials. One patron said her Chinese grandson had low English language skills, but he was able to use these kits because of the visual component of the instructions she created.

Elizabeth participates on local and national levels to promote library resources at conferences and webinars, with topics as diverse as summer reading, literacy, censorship, virtual programming, and more. For example, she taught a class for continuing education for seniors and retired people on "Children's Literature for Grandparents and the Young at Heart". One class review said, "I got so much

more than I expected. I thought I would get a few recommendations, but instead I got a whole new perspective." She has most recently presented at the 2020 ALSC National Institute on the library's partnership with PBS.

Sometimes this means she has had to make hard decisions and make decisions that are not always the most popular. For example, she started a series of "Drag Storytimes," which drew a little community ire. But she stood by her principles and was adamant that the library allows diverse voices to be heard. The attendance at the Drag events proved that this was something the community wanted: at the first event, over 400 enthusiastic attendees were there. Based on community requests, she helped the Youth Services team set up "Sign Language Storytime," "Sensory Friendly Storytime," "Spanish Bilingual Storytime," and "Yu'pik Bilingual Storytime."

Her decisions are based on community needs, and community members often express gratitude that their voices are heard. A new program she initiated is the "Scout Patch Program" for Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Trail Life Scouts, and American Heritage Girls. As a Daisy Scout troop leader herself, she was eager to improve the partnerships with Scouting groups, and she not only coordinated the program, but did all the outreach necessary for Scout leadership buy-in. Scouts come for a tour, get their library card, and do an age appropriate scavenger hunt. It's been so much fun to watch them come in!

Elizabeth uses the knowledge and resources she has as a mother and community member in all she strives to accomplish. Recognizing the need for mothers to have a private area for nursing, she applied for and received a grant to set up a nursing area in the library. Mothers routinely use this area for nursing, but it has also helped community members in other ways. Recently, a mother with an older child was using the area. She shared that he is autistic and was in overload/meltdown mode. She really appreciated the space that had limited sensory input to allow him to calm down.

Elizabeth is a bridge builder. She partnered the library with the local PBS station on their Ready to Learn program. Focusing on "Molly of Denali," she launched a preview event of the program. She presented nationally on this partnership at the ALSC National Institute in 2020. She created a strong partnership with the Anchorage Museum and set up a STEM training day at the museum for all library youth services staff. She also negotiated with the Museum to contribute kits to our STEM kit collection. In 2018, Elizabeth started a partnership with Anchorage Dads Group. One of their members is a professional educator and offered "early emerging readers" classes at the library. This program required very little staff time but offered a service that is perfectly in line with our strategic plan to work on early literacy. She organized an alternative K-12 School Fair that brought together 30 schools and educational organizations, including charter schools, language immersion programs, alternative schools, and homeschool organizations. At least 350 parents attended. This event played an important role in connecting the library to educational resources that parents may not even have known existed. Parents comments included: "This was such a stress relief!" and "Great program! It was wonderful to be able to talk to principals."

Elizabeth also has created and maintains great partnerships with local arts organizations. She began a partnership with “Spenaudeville,” which offers open rehearsal times and a monthly performance that the public can attend at the library. “Spenaudeville” is a family- friendly variety show put on by local performers. She negotiated with them that the library would provide space free of charge, provided that all events would be free to the public. Local theater companies have also been partnering with the library, thanks to Elizabeth’s leadership and community connections.

As part of our summer reading program, APL “adopts” a nonprofit organization to donate money to in the “Readers to the Rescue” program. This program is an incentive for readers to reach a reading minutes goal, and if they meet the goal, the Friends of the Library donate money to our chosen organization. Elizabeth coordinated this effort by purchasing \$1,000 of the Friends donation for school supplies for HUGSS (Helping Us Give School Supplies.) When it was time to distribute supplies, Elizabeth and other youth services librarians helped hand out backpacks with school supplies to 3,500 students.

In her highly popular storytimes, she has made it a library-wide policy to include literacy tips with parents in storytimes. A frequent attendee of Elizabeth’s storytimes, a mom whose daughter’s speech was delayed, asked Elizabeth for book recommendations to encourage talking. Elizabeth was able to recommend resources and strategies for encouraging child talk. At the end, the patron commented that she came to Elizabeth for help because she liked the way she framed things in storytime about child development. Her intentionally dropped early literacy tips really work. This relationship with caregivers builds the idea that the library is a trusted resource for parents and caregivers.

Outreach is a big priority for Elizabeth. She coordinates with school librarians to ensure that Youth Services Librarians we are visiting schools on a regular basis. Especially important to her is making sure we reach out to Title One schools, and every year we visit as many schools as we can in preparation for Summer Reading. Under her direction, in May 2019, between school visits, tours, and other opportunities, youth services librarians spoke to 1,785 people – primarily elementary school students about Summer Discovery. She keeps tabs on community organizations and events to make sure the library is represented at events such as Kids’ Day, Pride Day, Disability Pride Day, and many highly attended community events.

We are so very fortunate to have a leader like Elizabeth to move us forward in serving the children of Anchorage and indeed, all of Alaska, by focusing on literacy, community involvement, and responsiveness to the needs of children and caregivers. In these times of shrinking or static budgets and the necessary adjustments in services for the community in these uncertain and difficult times, Elizabeth demonstrates a flexibility in thinking that allows the library to adjust to changing needs and priorities quickly and effectively. She is an exemplar of a dedicated librarian whose life work has brought many improvements to Anchorage Public Library.