



I Love My
Librarian!
2015 Award

Nominee: Dona Helmer
College Gate Elementary
Anchorage, Alaska

Nominator: Tamara Ramsey

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

Dona Helmer is a lot of things. She is a certified librarian with MLS and an educational specialist degree in Media and Technology but she is more than just her professional training. She is an integral part of our educational team. She is an instructional coach, a helpmate and cheerleader for information and books. Whenever we need help, Dona is there to make a phone call, write a grant, and find that special book or website we need. She is a wonderful, supportive colleague.

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?

For the past three years, Dona Helmer has worked with second grade teachers on a Farm to School program. Dona feels that libraries and learning are for life. She works hard to help all our students understand that everything can be enhanced by going to the library for help. The library is larger than just a room.

Second graders learn how to search the Internet for recipes and nutritional information. They go on field trips to the Alaska Botanical Garden, have special guests who teach them about plants and soil. They also learn about Alaskan home grown vegetable and they cook. The Second Grade Chefs each receive a crock pot so they practice their skills at home with their families. The program is awesome and Dona does the bulk of the work—she finds the grants, organizes the bus, finds the speakers and gets the crockpots and vegetables.

Dona has also written two Art Excursion grants so that the second grade students can go to the PAC and see live theater. Many of our students could not afford to go on field trips without her help. Students learn about the history of theater, acting, storytelling. They also learn how to write letters and press releases to funding agents.

Dona works with everyone. A sixth grade teacher said that Dona is more than our school librarian, she is a curriculum innovator. She is always sending out links to new materials

and websites that can be used to create interest and excitement in the classroom. This past November she came into our classroom and worked with me and my sixth graders on a lesson on writing, researching and Thanksgiving. A crew came from a local TV station came to tape and interview my students about their experiences. The class was abuzz with learning. My students were so excited about writing about Thanksgiving and Sarah Hale but we could not have done it with Ms. Helmer. I also am the sponsor for a robotics club and Ms. Helmer helped me write a grant for more materials for the club.

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

Books are a big part of Dona's life and students know this. We are not a Title 1 school. When she realized that some students did not have any books, she wrote grants so that she could give each student 3 books. She has written an amazing 150 grants in the past 3 years for our school. She has also mentored and coached other teachers to write grants for their classrooms.

Helmer does so much for the students at our school. We are an economically depressed school but not a Title 1 school. Nearly 70% of our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. In order to help students, Dona runs the Turkey Trot and the Jingle Jog to provide holiday dinners to 20 needy College Gate Families. She provides nearly all the money for these meals.

She does a unit on homelessness in Anchorage. Using the Internet, students study the nature and magnitude of the problem and then brain storm solutions. For the past seven years, students work during November to make 60 fleece blankets to give to the Brother Francis Shelter. (Dona buys the fabric.)

She buys and give out mittens each year to needy children at our school via a thing she calls the mitten project. She runs a library club and a library store where kids earn "Dewey Dollars" and can buy the supplies they cannot afford.

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

Dona Helmer is a role model for students and staff because she is always questioning and always learning new things. She is an enthusiastic and tireless librarian who tries to provide materials for everyone. She goes out of her way to show students that the world of information is larger than four walls—the entire world is their library. She was the 2013 Alaska School Librarian of the Year. At the beginning of this school year was recognized by the Alaska state legislature for her work on the behalf of students and school libraries.

During the course of her lessons, Dona provides time for students to choose "just right books". Students have time to select something that appeals and also helps them with their class work. She tells students that being in the College Gate Library is preparation for the real world—they need to learn the rules and they need to learn about information. They need to learn to question and find answers to those questions. They need to explore. The library is not a place but a state of mind—it is not confined by four walls. Dona is trying to help every student become an independent member of a global community. She wants them to become independent lifelong readers and users of information.

The entire year is exciting at the College Gate Library. Every year, Dona makes sure that the whole school participates in "Read for the Record" with Jumpstart. This fall, she made sure that everyone learned about the importance of literacy as they experienced Grandmother Bunny from Rosemary Wells' Bunny Money book. February was African American Read in Month.

This March students in two classes that are learning about Trickster Tales will Skype with Jack Gladstone, a famous Native American author/storyteller from Montana. (This combines reading and technology. Like I said, she is sneaky about combining things.)

March is Read to Some Bunny Month and stuffed animal bunnies go home with children so children can read to the bunnies. April is Pizza and Poetry month. May is Research Counts month. The year is a whirlwind of fun activities and excitement in the College Gate library.

We simply couldn't do our job without Dona. We are all feeling the stress of doing more with less. Dona is trying to help us. Within the time constraints of our curriculum, she strives to help put active reading and research into the entire curriculum. For example, when first graders are struggling to do research on Alaskan animals, Dona helps tie the curriculum together by consulting with teachers about library skills and then suggesting a great classroom read aloud, finding nonfiction magazine articles, DVDs, video clips, speakers and writing a Target field trip grant. She even booked the bus! She does everything she can to expand and enhance the curriculum while teaching hers. All of her lessons add layers of information and help students make connections across the curriculum. If students are learning to use the Internet, they are also learning about famous authors or illustrators or how to cite a source.

As one of my second grade students said, "She is Awesome! I want to be a librarian just like her when I grow up!"

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

At the district, Dona is a member of the ASD Library Resource Committee and has been a member of the ASD Language Arts Curriculum Committee and the ASD Social Studies Curriculum Committee. She feels it is important for librarians to be seen as supportive, active members of the professional communities and educational teams so she does not restrict her efforts to just library organizations.

Dona also works for the library profession. At the National Level, she serves on the American Library Association's Reference Books Bulletin Advisory Board and writes reviews for RBB. Dona has been a member of both the Newbery and Caldecott Award committees and recently was a member of the Siebert Award Committee for ALA. She has served on the IRA book and poetry award committees and the NCSS Carter G. Woodson history book award committee. She is a member of the Alaska Library Association and is the current President of AkASL. She has served as member of the Battle of the Books "selection" group for grades 3-4 and a member of the Authors-2-Alaska committee. Locally, she is the past President of CILC (Cook Inlet Literacy Council)