Paula Kelly
Whitehall Public Library
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Nominators: Helen Dubina and the Board Members of Whitehall Public Library

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets them apart?
   “America needs more Paulas,” says Khara Timsina, a community leader and Bhutanese immigrant to the United States—aptly describing why Paula Kelly is a worthy candidate for this award.

   At a time when American society has become rife with divisiveness, Paula uses her remarkable knowledge, ability and integrity as a library director in southwestern Pennsylvania to build community connections and educate residents that there should be a better way for us all to live together.

   Committed to inclusion, partnerships and collaboration, Paula is a recognized leader throughout her county’s consortium of libraries and readily shares her education, programming and advocacy strategies with peers locally and beyond—indeed, this summer she was lauded by the Allegheny County Chief Executive and its Department of Human Services for “outstanding outreach . . . to engage immigrants and refugees . . . with communities in the South Hills.”

2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and made your experience of the library a positive one. For instance, did the nominee inspire in you a love for literature; assist you in a project or finding other information?
   Paula has provided substantive help to two generations of the family of Irena Czuczman, who emigrated from Kiev, Ukraine in 1995. Paula’s efforts to assist them with their educational needs resulted in greater college and career opportunities. Ultimately, this meant a successful transition to American life.
“I have known Paula forever—well, since I started residing in Whitehall in 2000,” Irena said. “This was even before she was the library director. I adore her to pieces.

“When I was attending dental hygienist school in 2002-04 I used the Whitehall Public Library (WPL) as a study place, because I lived in a tiny apartment with my mom and daughter. There was no ability to study there, so the library was my community nest. I used the computers all the time, but my second language of English was a little obstacle. Paula was so kind to proofread my work for school any time I asked! She helped me with grammar, prepositions, articles . . .

“She is excellent, too, in personal life things like cooking. We shared that interest, and I could come to her for guidance. Thanksgiving was all new to me; I wanted to make a traditional meal, and Paula helped me learn.”

More recently, Irena and her now grown daughter Kateryna turned to the library for guidance on the difficult decision of where Kateryna should attend college. Paula and the library staff helped them research appropriate information and vet their choices, Irena said.

Kateryna is now a biology major at the prestigious Washington and Jefferson College, near Pittsburgh.

“Every time we need a book for her, Paula bends backward and forward to find it—even if the regular librarians can’t find it,” Irena said. “I always know when I go to her all will be accomplished.”

Pete Kostanich is another long-time library user who has benefitted from Paula’s personal attention. The elderly gentleman enjoys watching DVDs from the library’s collection, since he is unable to get out and about as he used to do. That’s why Paula keeps a running list of his preferences and which of the library’s holdings he hasn’t viewed yet.

Pete was so touched by this effort and personal attention that he donated money to help fund the collection. A plaque was hung on the DVD shelves to honor him.

“Paula is really great at customer service,” said WPL Children’s Librarian Denise Ignasky. “She always does what’s best for the patrons. And so many people, even from outside the borough, come here because of Paula.”

Kathy Lesyk has been visiting the WPL for years, and sometimes she arrives with pizza or chocolates for the staff.
“I know people donate money to the library, but I also like to recognize the staff. They’re such a good group because of Paula and Denise who have worked there practically since they were kids,” Kathy said. “I was real happy when Paula was named director (in 2009). She always went out of her way for everyone, and she’s been able to bring in more funding through grants and partnerships.”

“Many people have been touched by Paula’s grace,” said Khara Timsina, civic education and outreach manager for the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh. He has witnessed the outreach and inclusion efforts she has spearheaded with diverse populations living in this area.

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

   “Paula is truly a librarian who makes positive changes in the community,” said Renee Christman, ESL teacher for the Baldwin-Whitehall School District.

   “Through her work with ‘Saving Stories,’ the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, the LEARN Bus program (see below) or the Technology Night for Adult English Learners, Paula tirelessly and enthusiastically strives to improve access to information for all residents. She is always eager to collaborate with the local school district and various community agencies to create meaningful programs,” Renee said.

   Indeed, Paula’s energy and devotion to the library and community seem boundless.

   “She usually works six days a week,” said Children’s Librarian Denise Ignasky. She’s often out in the community—even if it’s not her day to work—brining “pop-up” library services to the recreation department’s outdoor movie nights or local farmer’s markets. She has participated in distributing back-to-school back packs for the South Hills Interfaith Movement, taken discarded books to community centers and helped with a local playground construction project.

   “As library director she could easily assign others to these outreach efforts, but she’s always willing to go out into the community,” Denise said.

   According to Marilyn Jenkins, executive director of the Allegheny County Library Association (ACLA), Paula is constantly looking for creative ways to make library service more meaningful to her community.
“She is a librarian who never shies away from challenges but always asks instead, ‘how can I make this happen?’ And then she just goes and does it—deliberately, methodically and without fanfare,” she said.

Whether she is out in the community or in the library, Paula’s main goal is to project an attitude of helpfulness, welcome and inclusion.

She serves on the board of directors of the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh and has made many connections with immigrants through ESL tutoring and the LEARN bus initiative. She invites resettled refugees to participate in civic events such as Earth Day, the Fourth of July parade and multicultural potluck dinners.

In April 2017, the WPL hosted a special event to celebrate the ACLA’s grant-funded Digital Storytelling Project. More than 200 people attended the presentation, entitled “Immigration Journeys: Old and New,” which showcased the results of the endeavor.

During previous project workshops held at the WPL, both recent refugees and long-time residents with a family history of immigration had created their digital stories with family photos, memorabilia and copyright-free images from the web. The project was relevant to public discussion of how our country can respond to the current refugee crisis and immigration in general by making the sensitive point that nearly all of our families once were immigrants.

The event highlighted the community’s diverse cultures and featured videos, music, dancing and ethnic foods.

In May 2017, the WPL joined forces with neighboring Brentwood and Baldwin public libraries and regional social service agencies to host “We’re All Neighbors: A Multicultural Community Celebration.” More than 600 people attended the grant-funded festival which featured music and foods of ethnic groups that make up the region. Attendees learned about culture and traditions and spoke with area service providers about their specific roles in support of our local diversity.

The WPL often finds itself collaborating with other libraries or providers to benefit local residents.

“Paula has no need to be the best or only one doing something,” said Laurie Anderson, former grants and special projects coordinator for ACLA. “She recognizes that true service to the community is only possible by working with others, so that the strengths of several organizations are focused on a need or issue.”
Her involvement extends also to her alma mater, the University of Pittsburgh, from which she earned her MLIS degree in 2009. She has been a field experience mentor to MLIS students, provided guest lectures about her work as a public library director and served on alumni committees.

“She serves as a role model for those interested in public libraries, and she clearly demonstrates the impact one person can make in our profession,” said faculty member Elizabeth Mahoney.

Paula’s dedication to area residents earned her a 2012 Community Champion Award from the Pittsburgh Pirates and a 2013 Jefferson Award for public service. In 2013 the WPL was named Partner of the Year by the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council in recognition of the many hours of volunteer ESL tutoring by Paula and fellow librarian Denise Ignasky.

The Borough of Whitehall selected Paula as Citizen of the Year in 2016. In part, the acclamation read: “During her tenure, she has implemented the means to expand the world of information to many groups of people by obtaining grants to fund Senior Space, the Second Chapter Café, Family Place and English conversation and citizenship practice programs . . . Mrs. Kelly has demonstrated remarkable knowledge, ability and integrity in carrying out her many responsibilities.”

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

By partnering with the borough, the school district and the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, the library provides special opportunities for learning and socialization to refugees of war-torn areas now living in Whitehall with The LEARN bus—Library Easy Access for Residents in Need.

Once a month the big, yellow school bus picks up immigrant families and brings them to the library to check out books and socialize.

Over the years, Paula has tailored the program to the needs of the displaced families, for instance by preselecting pertinent materials so they are not overwhelmed by a myriad of choices. She also provides information and speakers on obtaining citizenship and other topics to help them assimilate into this country.

For some participants, this is one of the few trips outside their apartment complex.
“This has helped keep people out of depression—especially our elders—because they are engaged and not feeling isolated,” said Khara Timsina. Making the library accessible and immigrant-friendly has helped the refugees develop reading habits they never had before.

“In Bhutan reading was not a thing for most people. There were no libraries for most of the country. Newspapers were out-of-reach. No one had money to purchase them, so literacy was really low,” he said.

Paula herself served as a volunteer literacy tutor for GPLC for nearly seven years, helping to create new readers and enhancing their chances for success in life.

In adjusting to this country immigrants leave many old ways, cultures and languages behind. Recognizing this loss, Paula and Baldwin-Whitehall ESL teacher Renee Christman began “Saving Stories,” a bilingual book project, five years ago.

They collected oral and written tales from resettled refugees, partnered with student artists and approached grant funders to publish books—now fittingly available in the school and public libraries, even through Amazon.com. The storybooks also serve as a tool to help learners with their English lessons.

Renee mentioned a touching scene at the unveiling party when the first four books were published. About 100 people, most of them local refugees, attended to view a slide show detailing how the works were collected, written, translated, typed, illustrated, vetted and finally published. A request for donations to keep the project going came at the end.

“It was heartwarming to see scores of refugees, who have extremely limited money, smiling and stuffing the donation box with dollar bills,” she said.

An editorial in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette praised the project’s creators: “...Americans should extend a helping hand to those who find their way here, especially refugees who fled turbulence in their homelands. Ms. Christman and Ms. Kelly have embraced this obligation. At a time where there is much conversation about building a wall, they have worked diligently to tear one down.”

To date, after additional funding, eight books have been published. The program has also become the subject of grant-funded research at Duquesne University about the effects of “Saving Stories” on the local refugee population.

Paula has been involved in concrete methods for acclimating immigrants to their new community, such as hosting and moderating GPLC’s first “Spelling in My Second
Language” Spelling Bee and partnering with Global Wordsmiths, a translation service that offers free help to nonprofits working directly with immigrants and refugees. This enabled the library to arrange for translation of important government, health and safety details for those who need this practical information.

She also seeks out opportunities for resettled populations and long-time local residents to get acquainted. Counting on good food and conversation to bring people together, she spearheaded a Multicultural Potluck Dinner at the library last year, where nearly 100 participants enjoyed a multitude of ethnic dishes and much goodwill. This year the library plans to partner with nearby Baldwin Library and the Baldwin-Whitehall School District to expand the event.

Paula also worked with the Bhutanese community to develop a pamphlet, “Learn about Your Newest Neighbors,” to help original residents understand the background of the resettled refugees and their culture, customs and roles as contributing members of society.

Her efforts to effect a welcoming and inclusive community have inspired other diversity committees and partnerships in the region. In fact, she has been interviewed by a doctoral candidate from Boston University who is researching refugee reception policies in the United States.

Other populations, as well, have benefitted from improved quality of life, thanks to programs at the library.

The WPL regularly hosts special needs students to provide them with real-life work experience. Older residents have found a welcome place to share coffee, conversation and even the latest movies. Board and card game players of all ages regularly stop in for challenging matches. Additionally, there are frequent outreach programs to pre-school centers, elementary schools and local senior care homes.

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

Paula began working at the WPL in 1997 and became the director in 2009. Under her guidance, the library has inaugurated many initiatives to improve services. More than just a repository of books and computers, the library serves as the borough’s de facto community center.

As is true of many libraries, one of the WPL’s chief challenges has been a finite amount of space in which to offer growing programs. Over the past two years Paula has overseen upgrades to the children’s library, reference area and staff and storage areas in order to
use every inch of space more efficiently. Programs even have branched out to the adjacent park plaza when possible.

Previously, she was awarded a $4,000 Library Services and Technology Act grant administered by the state Office of Commonwealth Libraries to transfer a cluttered storage room to a warm and cozy nook for the area’s older residents. They meet regularly in this “Second Chapter Café” to learn about technology, discuss current events and watch popular films.

Several years ago she worked closely with the former children’s librarian to complete the certification process for designation as a Family Place Library.™ This meant achieving core requirements including: training staff, acquiring special collections, providing interactive play spaces, offering parent-child workshops and collaborating with community partners.

While focusing on making the library a better place for patrons, Paula also makes sure to project a pleasant and collaborative working environment for staff. Turnover is low, and teamwork is valued. She is quick to credit the contributions of staff members for the library’s great reputation and many accomplishments.

Paula frequently pitches in on the circulation desk, interacting with patrons and staying attuned to what is happening.

To keep up with the ever-changing demands of technology, she established an in-house digital services committee to enhance employees’ competencies in this area. The library offers one-on-one and group instruction to patrons in need of help with their electronic tools.

Simply stated, Paula is a full-time advocate for the library, its staff and the community it serves. The education and programs provided by the WPL make a difference in many lives.