Homa Naficy
Hartford Public Library
Hartford, Connecticut

Nominated by: Bridget Quinn-Carey and Nancy Caddigan

It is our honor to nominate Homa Naficy for the I love My Librarian Award. She is the epitome of a visionary and dedicated librarian, and her career has been devoted to creating services for underserved populations. Her work has impacted hundreds if not thousands of people, and her pioneering model is one other public libraries continue to replicate.

In response to a sudden influx of refugees and immigrants into the Greater Hartford area in 2000, the newly-appointed Coordinator (now Executive Director) Homa Naficy, made an ironclad commitment to providing them the highest level of service delivery - both within and beyond the walls of our Library. She has never wavered from this commitment. The American Place at Hartford Public Library opened its doors in 2000 and is dedicated to welcoming and assisting new arrival immigrants and refugees. She has been a tireless advocate for the residents of Hartford for almost two decades, ensuring those who need guidance find a welcoming place with skilled, compassionate, knowledgeable staff available to help. Homa has created a culture of inclusivity that ensures HPL is a trusted place for people to turn for assistance and has positioned HPL to be the leading voice of advocacy and service delivery for immigrants and refugees in our community and throughout our state.

Homa goes above and beyond her role as a librarian every day. Under her leaderships, The American Place (TAP) has continued serving immigrants, refugees and most recently adult learners and continuously seeks to improve upon or add services as needs arise. She is the architect of the program and has dedicated her professional career as a librarian at HPL to serving marginalized and disenfranchised populations. Homa's quick-on-her-feet ability to solve pressing issues that arise combined with her drive to forge innovative avenues addressing the many challenges our customers face as they make the daunting transition to living in their new home city, make Homa an outstanding candidate for this prestigious recognition.

During the initial years of establishing TAP, Homa noted that TAP clients were frequently turning to staff for assistance in solving the challenges they were encountering with immigration issues primarily related to residency status or pursuing naturalization. In response, Homa developed a partnership with Hartford’s United States Citizenship and Immigration Services office. And in 2013, HPL sought and received accreditation by the Bureau of Immigration Affairs to provide legal services to immigrants. Hartford Public Library is the first library in the nation to receive such a designation; she set the model and led the
way for other libraries to follow, including the Queens Library in New York. Homa is the reason HPL is an accredited institution and a trusted partner within the immigrant community and with USCIS.

Not only is Homa a consummate library professional but also an advocate, partner, collaborator and visionary leader who continues to build and strengthen the services offered through The American Place. She considers it crucial that new arrival individuals and families gain a stronger foothold in our City and remain connected to The American Place as their well-earned accomplishments of key milestones are often attained by enrolling in one or more of TAP’s numerous educational and training offerings aimed at supporting their trajectory towards achieving self-sufficiency. These programs include acquisition of English language skills, preparation for and retention in employment in healthcare or food service industries, completion of a GED or high school credential and attainment of U.S. citizenship.

Homa oversees hundreds of TAP programs and services annually that she has shaped and implemented to further advance our students’ opportunities for upward mobility. In the third quarter of FY19 alone, 50 people attained citizenship through TAP’s program and an additional 179 were screened to enter the program; systemwide citizenship classes logged 668 in attendance. Thirty-nine people were assisted in that quarter renewing their green cards. English language learning is a key service of TAP: in the third quarter, 98 ELL classes were held across four library locations, with attendance of 1,716 people, including youth (teen) and adult. Driver’s Ed preparation for non-English speakers, a newer service offering, saw 131 people participate in the same time period. Other key services of TAP include the American Job Center, which served 290 people in FY19 Q3, and Digital Literacy instruction, which served 237 people. In a small city of only 125,000 people, the attendance and participation in TAP’s programming is significant.

Hartford is a better place because of Homa’s remarkable work ethic and through the productivity of The American Place. Homa’s efforts extend beyond the typical workday, and she can often be seen on weekends and evenings distributing flyers in local businesses and community organizations, meeting with community members in church basements to build awareness of library services, and creating social and professional networks to build relationships and trust in the community.

Homa is a visionary leader and continuously strives to offer impactful programs and services and is never content to “just keep doing what we’re doing.” In the past three years, she has designed many new services including Crossroads-to-Connectivity, an innovative project that targets low-income adults enrolled in educational or skill training programs. Forty percent of Hartford residents do not have access to broadband Internet services. Participants in the C2C program borrow a laptop and mobile Wi-Fi device for an extended time period and receive training in how to use the equipment and learning resources to enable them to be successful in their educational endeavors. The next phase of the project is to introduce TV White Space in an area of the City lacking access to affordable broadband service.

Identifying a critical need to support a new wave of late-arrival immigrant teens enrolling in Hartford high schools with limited English language skills and interrupted schooling in 2015, Homa oversaw the introduction of an after-school program located at the downtown site at HPL. The Library partners with Hartford Public Schools to foster these students’ community connections and civic awareness while accelerating their English Language development. An interactive, online curriculum was designed to strengthen students’ linguistic and academic skills through assignments related to the concept of
belonging – in one’s new school, new neighborhood and the community-at-large. The project goal is to ensure high school completion and subsequent pursuit of post-secondary education or training. In its first two years, this program has seen the vast majority of its participants graduate from high school; last year two of the participants graduated as Valedictorian and Salutatorian of their class. Those two students are now enrolled at the University of Connecticut, pursuing 4-year degrees.

In 2017, Hartford Public Library reorganized and restructured its services and locations, consolidating three locations. One of the impacted communities included a cohort of adult refugees in need of additional support for language learning and basic citizenship instruction. Homa developed a plan to offer the HPL Saturday Academy at the closed location to facilitate access to educational services by neighborhood residents. This initiative required considerable negotiating skills with the public-school administration yielding a fortunate outcome as Year Two of the Academy is now underway. These programs have been enormously successful.

It’s impossible to estimate how many people’s lives have been positively impacted by Homa’s creativity, spunk and utter dedication. One example is Luis (last name withheld) who appeared at TAP’s public service desk in 2017 inquiring about a new free program which he had heard was offering training for employment in the food service industry (TAP’s Immigrant Career Pathways Program established in 2016.) Luis shared that he had learned about the program from his counselor at the nearby homeless shelter where he had been living for 8 months. The counselor knew that Luis had previously worked as a dishwasher and short-order cook. While Luis seemed a bit tentative at that first visit, his level of self-confidence began visibly rising as he enrolled and became engaged in the Library’s Food Handler class receiving accolades at his internship for his performance. This led him to steady, part-time work. Knowing that a full-time position would qualify him to apply for supportive housing, Luis opted to take on the more challenging ServSafe Manager’s training course with exam-based certification. He succeeded and secured a full-time cook’s position at a local restaurant. Having retained that position over multiple months, Luis was able to move to a renovated apartment and has been living independently ever since.

The extensive diversity of customers who visit HPL – whose initial destination may be TAP - greatly enriches our work at HPL across departments. In fact, these customers, hailing from countries across the globe, can be found participating in numerous activities and events held downtown and at our various branches. Their many contributions to our Library’s culture are immeasurable and remind us how TAP’s mantra, We Belong Here, perfectly aligns with HPL’s enduring mission/vision. This would not have been possible without the vision, leadership and dedication of Homa Naficy.

Testimonials
Dr. Janet Bauer, Associate Professor, Trinity College
International Studies Program and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Program
Fulbright Global Scholar, 2017-2018
Co-Chair, City of Hartford’s Commission on Refugee and Immigrant Affairs
Homa Naficy has left an indelible imprint on immigrant futures in Hartford. Her creativity, imagination, tenacity, and hard work have produced numerous grant-supported, pioneering, programs and workshops at Hartford Public Library, which have not only facilitated immigrant inclusion and informed the broader public about immigrant issues but have also served as examples of “best practices” for communities
across the country. These programs, often in collaboration with local community organizations, include an Immigrant Advisory Board, out of which Hartford’s Commission for Refugees and immigrants was established, World Refugee Day celebrations bringing refugees from across Hartford to share their crafts, music and culture, innumerable events on immigrants and Islam including a Bridging Cultures reading group and film series, a We Belong Campaign, the Cultural Navigator Program, the Civic Engagement initiative, ESL classes, the IMLS After School English Program (an immigrant youth mentoring initiative), programs that facilitate youth citizenship and employment training, community immigration forums (supported by a Kettering Grant), and Small Business Administration workshops on entrepreneurship.

Drawing on insights from her own experience, Homa’s innovative and visionary strategy for developing, revising, and managing these immigrant programs relies on the participation of, and feedback from, newcomers themselves toward building up immigrant skill sets and fostering interaction between newcomers and other residents. Without her untiring efforts immigrant Hartford would be a very different, and less welcoming, place.

Michele Brophy, Instructional Specialist, Hartford Public Library
Since coming to work at Hartford Public Library, I have been amazed by the diverse array of services and cultural opportunities provided to the residents of Hartford by Hartford Public Library. Hartford Public Library is, indeed, “A Place Like No Other.” In particular, I have been impressed by the laser focused commitment to immigrants and refugees through The American Place, founded by Homa Naficy. Whether it is legal assistance for citizenship applications, English classes for adults and teens, GED preparation, computer skills or job training, new arrivals to Hartford can find a central source of information and guidance they can trust at The American Place. Homa Naficy’s vision, creativity, and unwavering dedication to immigrants and refugees is unparalleled. She is a fireball of energy, constantly generating new ideas and innovative strategies to advocate for newcomers. Her extensive network of professional connections and her stellar reputation on a national level help to leverage additional resources to meet the significant challenges faced by this population. The American Place is a WELCOMING space!