Maria Papanastassiou
Arlington Heights Memorial Library
Arlington Heights, Illinois

Nominated by: Patricia Aichele, Trixie Dantis, Shannon Distel, April Harder, Mary Hastings, Beth Deiter, and Kate Thompson

In what ways does the nominee go above and beyond in their role as librarian?
Families with diverse needs have found a home at the Arlington Heights Memorial Library due to the above and beyond work, passion and dedication of one very special librarian.

“Arlington Heights is at the forefront of serving children who are differently abled…Maria specially prepares for us and creates this welcoming atmosphere where being differently abled is okay. We are in a space where we are accepted and my son can be himself,” says Manju Mathai, mother of Leo, a four-year-old who receives therapy services.

Manju and Leo regularly participate in Caregivers, Coffee and Play, a library program described as ‘life-changing’ by families who participate, thanks in large part to Maria Papanastassiou, Kids’ World Assistant Manager at the Arlington Heights Memorial Library (AHML).

Maria’s dedication to making the library an inclusive place, where all customers feel welcome, demonstrates why she is a great choice for this award. Because of her background in special education, Maria serves as a remarkable advocate for families and children of varying abilities.

Much of what Maria has accomplished lies rooted in her exceptional skills as a collaborator. For the past several years, Maria has served as the library’s key architect for an innovative partnership between AHML and C.I.T.Y. (Children In Therapy and You) of Support, a neighboring nonprofit, whose mission is ‘to create a dynamic community, both online and in person, that supports all families navigating the needs of their child in therapy.’ The founder of C.I.T.Y. of Support, Beth Deiter, shared these thoughts: “It is an honor to support Maria Papanastassiou’s nomination for the I Love My Librarian award. I have known Maria personally for the past five years, and our partnership has not only been a personal joy, but also one that has helped to foster innovative and consistently-successful opportunities for a diverse group of families whose children receive therapy services. Maria’s inclusive and warm nature help these somewhat isolated families feel more confident in their ability to participate in and enjoy library programs and similar community outings. We both understand that our work and volunteer efforts are creating a significant opportunity for children in therapy and their families. The ability to make an impact in the lives of this generally under-represented population continues to be our primary motivation.”
Maria’s work is truly transformative as it makes the childhood activity of even going to the library possible for some families. It is amazing, and in some ways humbling, when you realize that what has evolved began with something as ordinary as a customer suggestion.

Deiter, a local pediatric speech pathologist, found in conversation with parents of the children she treated that they were often worried about relating to other parents who had children without developmental challenges. Beth discovered that the parents of her clients often avoided going to a library out of fear that their child’s behavior would be judged by others in a public setting. This motivated Beth to contact the library on the caregivers’ behalf. That’s when she met Maria.

“I presented her with a vague request to incorporate more playgroups for children who receive therapy and their families,” Deiter said. “Maria embraced the idea wholeheartedly and together, we created the Early Intervention Playgroup.”

Maria’s willingness to embrace, listen and be open to new ideas underscores her keen ability to take a small suggestion and envision the greater good and bigger possibilities. She understands, and her work stands as a testament to, what libraries can accomplish when they collaborate and create partnerships with organizations that share similar goals and values. This partnership not only speaks to Maria’s remarkable skills as a collaborator, but also exemplifies the power of what can result when libraries and other groups work together to share resources and combine expertise. Truly, we are ‘stronger together.’

How does the nominee make their community a better place?

Maria makes her community a better place in so many ways as a collaborator, facilitator, advocate and mentor. The consummate teacher, Maria exemplifies what it means to give back.

“How does the nominee make their community a better place?”

Maria took time from her busy schedule to volunteer as a mentor with the ALSC Mentoring Program. As her mentee, I’ve benefited from her experience and enthusiasm as I’ve learned so much about how to implement programs for unique populations. She spent hours each month talking with me, developing plans and emailing ideas,” said Kate Thompson, a reference librarian and information literacy instructor at Des Moines Area Community College. Maria began mentoring Kate through The Association for Library Service to Children in the fall of 2018 when Kate was a student at the University of Alabama.

“In the time we worked together, I noticed that Maria was happy to engage with others outside of her immediate circle – working with parent groups from local schools, joining boards and committees, and networking with colleagues in different areas who share this common interest. While working on developing a lending library of equipment, she was willing to let me assist with research she was doing in finding out best practices from other libraries. She knows that it’s important to see what others have done before and benefit from their wisdom, and we often talked about how willing librarians are in general to share their knowledge. That selfless willingness to share information and programs is one of the great things about this field, and she exemplifies this spirit,” said Thompson.

In May of this year, Maria and Kate’s coach/mentee partnership resulted in AHML’s first IEP Binder Making and Lego Party. Based on the knowledge that often families who have children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork they need to
organize, the program offered much-needed relief. The program provided adult attendees with organizational supplies and expertise, local resources for additional support and most importantly – childcare, so they could even attend in the first place. The children enjoyed a LEGO program and played in a separate area but within sightlines of the caregivers. The attendees expressed gratitude and thanks. “Maria has a holistic concept of service and is able to articulate the need to create better accessibility as an opportunity rather than an obligation,” said Thompson.

Beth Deiter described how Maria’s work continues to multiply.

“Years later, Maria’s energy, dedication, and playful spirit continue to be seen in our current playgroups (now offered twice a month). Whether she has set up a picnic blanket with pretend food to facilitate imaginative play, a circus tent for children needing a low-sensory environment, stepping stones to practice gross motor skills, felt characters with story boards to encourage language expansion, make-your-own unicorn crafts for fine motor development, or, my favorite, insta-snow for sensory exploration, her versatility and purposeful planning shines through each time.”

In addition to her creativity, Maria’s understanding of the unique needs of this population of families has also continued to grow. She welcomes everyone by providing inclusive opportunities to participate in all of the activities available, while facilitating on-the-spot accommodations when necessary. She can sense when a child might be feeling under-stimulated, and she will approach him/her on the floor to initiate play. She is flexible with the low-structure routine, easily adapting to singing in a quiet voice if a child is feeling overwhelmed.

The highly successful Developmental Playgroup, formerly the Early Intervention Playgroup, continues to attract a wide variety of customers with consistently strong attendance each month, and it is not uncommon to learn that families have traveled 15-30 minutes in order to attend. Parents who have children with visible needs (i.e. Down syndrome, cerebral palsy) and invisible needs (i.e. sensory processing disorder, language delays) are all encouraged to participate, as are their siblings. One parent, Nicole, provided this feedback after participating in one of the library’s playgroups. She said:

“It has been a pleasure to bring my energetic, two-year-old son to the Early Intervention Playgroup at the Arlington Heights Library. Each session speech pathologist Beth Deiter creates a welcoming environment for all kinds of children. While a story time can be fun, my son benefits greatly from the opportunity to move freely, create with different materials and even get messy without feeling restricted. My son is able to interact with other kids and work on social skills in a fun and safe environment. In turn, I as a mom can talk with other parents and caretakers that have children close in age to my son. My son has enjoyed everything from the play swimming pool filled with cute toys to musical instruments and strategically chosen books that encourage fun dialogue. I wish more libraries offered wonderful programs like this playgroup that brought together families and children with all abilities.”

Another mother shared these reflections, “Even though there are children of all different abilities and vast array of needs, it’s a level playing field of sorts.”
“Since the library is well-loved by the community, Maria’s ability to foster an inclusive environment encourages other organizations to consider inclusion when developing services,” said Trixie Dantis, Youth Services Manager at AHML.

A glance at the library’s October program calendar provides a clear snapshot of Maria’s ability to foster and help grow inclusion.

Under Maria’s steady guidance, AHML offers regularly scheduled programs and meet-ups including Our Time: Caregivers, Coffee, and Play, which links therapists and caregivers in an informal setting. For attendees without childcare, an activity is presented for children attending. Developmental Playgroup provides a more structured schedule with more activities for 0-5 year-olds, but still gives adult participants an opportunity to share resources and support each other.

In October, AHML also celebrated Inclusion Awareness Month, highlighting these efforts that have expanded beyond Kids’ World. Inclusion programs served many audiences and covered topics like college planning for students with learning differences, job seeking for people with disabilities and weekly resource hours featuring different community organizations. Resources highlighted ranged from support services for the visually impaired to information on mobility options.

“I have attended inclusive programming organized by Maria and the interactions she has with children and their parents or caregivers is inspiring. She pays attention to every detail, from the appropriateness of toys, to the size and colors of books, to the comfort of a baby on their stomach with a toy and a mother on the floor with her toddler, and all in an environment of learning and exploration. Maria is leading public libraries into the future of inclusion where abilities and social interactions are celebrated for their common experiences and their differences,” said Shannon Distel, Deputy Director at AHML.

And if the past is a predictor of the future, Maria is just getting started. In April of 2017, Maria was asked to guest author a column for our monthly library newsletter about her work as the then Early Literacy Services Supervisor. Her article was titled: 'Everyone is welcome.' Here is what she wrote:

“We strive to make our programs inclusive, as well as create targeted programming to meet a particular audience’s needs, such as Early Intervention Playgroup or our new First Time Parents Meet-Up. We share responsibility to be vigilant that our programs, services, and collections are accessible to all of our customers. Developing programming on the weekends and evenings for busy families, presenting storytimes in multiple formats, expanding our community engagement and offering opportunities to learn about different peoples’ experiences through books and programs are all ways we are adapting to the changing needs of our community.”

*How has the nominee improved your life or the lives of others in your community?*

“Maria really cares about the kids a lot,” says parent Chikako Danecz. “She offers different topics at every playgroup, and she is so knowledgeable and always willing to help.”

“This library is so much more than books. It’s like a community center. My daughter gets a chance to talk to other kids, and her mom and I get to talk to professionals. I’m not sure what we would do without it.
It’s the only group of its kind in the area,” said Mike Dancz, father of three-year-old Erica talking about the unique support that Caregivers, Coffee and Play provides not only for his child but for him and his wife, Chikako.

Mike and Chikako attended one of Maria’s recent Sunday morning Caregivers, Coffee and Play. Together they talked about the fear they experienced early on as new parents trying to navigate the unknown of where and how to find therapy resources for their daughter. They discovered the playgroups at AHML for children in therapy and started attending when their daughter was 18-months-old.

“We were so worried about her development, so it was perfect for me to talk to other moms and good for her to see other kids,” says Chikako. “Her speech skills have really developed and from this play group she meets other kids with various needs and her social skills have improved a lot. She’s become so cheerful and says hello to everyone.”

Motivated and building upon the opportunity to change lives, similar to the Dancz family’s experience, Maria has broadened her vision and designed and implemented a smaller, inclusive version of the children’s programs at the library that typically attract over 100 participants. As a result, AHML now offers sensory-friendly versions of family movie nights and live theater and music performances, among other events. Families who attend not only experience a customized performance but also find at the ready tools like lap weights and fidget toys thanks to Maria’s tireless attention to detail and commitment to helping families and children succeed no matter their ability.

“By doing this, we have been able to offer everyone in our community an opportunity to experience children’s performers in a comfortable environment,” said Dantis, Youth Services Manager.

Manju Mathai recalls the wonderful feeling of the first time taking Leo to the library to see a musical performer and not having to worry if her son’s behavior would disrupt others.

“This took the stress off of me,” said Mathai. “It’s comforting to know we are all in an inclusive setting and whatever happens will be okay.”

Another shining example of Maria improving the lives of others in our community happened when AHML hosted a Fairy Tale play exhibit in early 2016. From the moment the exhibit opened in January, it was an instant hit with the community, attracting crowds of children and their caregivers each day to Kids’ World. Maria viewed the high customer traffic and increased noise level, again as an opportunity, and was inspired to advocate for and create a first for children in our community – Early Open for Families with Special Needs. She described an invitation to explore the fairy tale exhibit as such: “Hear ye, hear ye! People with special needs and their families are invited to explore the play exhibit "Once Upon a Time...Exploring the World of Fairy Tales" at a special time and in an intimate, quiet setting before the library opens. A quiet room outside the exhibit will be available as well for customers.”

Helping make the library a safe place for families of all abilities and backgrounds has always been one of Maria’s personal goals. As Maria wrote in her own words for the library newsletter in April 2017:

“Our library has grown to become a refuge for all who enter our doors. On any given day, I can walk through Kids’ World and hear a variety of languages spoken, see a mixture of skin colors, witness the
diversity of our customers’ abilities and beliefs. I have the privilege of sharing the wonders that our library offers, from our dynamic programs and services to the variety of our collections with all of our customers, whether long-time residents or newcomers.”

*What makes the nominee a leader in their community?*

Maria leads by example to make her community a better place and has taken her message beyond the walls of the library. Maria now serves on the Board of C.I.T.Y. of Support.

“Her background, creativity, dedication, and compassion is an ideal match in helping our organization stay true to our mission and optimizing our potential impact,” said Beth Deiter. “Maria would be a fantastic candidate to receive the I Love My Librarian award, as she truly has made an incredible difference in the community, especially for those families who have children in therapy. I am inspired by her enthusiasm, hard work, and vision, and I am thrilled that she and I continue to collaborate as colleagues and friends.”

Maria and Beth’s work was featured in a national publication of the American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA) in November 2017. The article titled, “Check out Your Local Library,” relayed the success of their partnership and encouraged other nonprofits and libraries to find ways to work together to make a difference in their communities.

Maria also mentors other librarians, presents at conferences on this topic and is the driving force in the library’s recent application to be recognized as a Family Place Library. Maria’s work has made the Arlington Heights Memorial Library a welcoming and reliable source for information for families with all kinds of needs. The library is taking steps to adopt this initiative into 2019 and beyond.

At recent all-staff meetings, Maria introduced the Family Place Library concept, and shared her vision with her colleagues saying, “The library is the first place a child or parent starts to learn.”

Maria is an advocate, champion of children and families, mentor and a teacher. The impact of her work can be seen in the countless number of families and children in therapy who now turn to the Arlington Heights Memorial Library and think of it as their home. Maria’s passion for inclusion and leadership in making the library welcoming for all makes her a deserving and truly outstanding candidate for the I Love My Librarian 2019 award!