

I Love My Librarian!

2017 Award

Rosemary Cooper

Albert Wisner Public Library
Warwick, New York

Nominator: Susan Supak

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

Rosemary Cooper, director of the Albert Wisner Public Library located in New York's Hudson Valley, is unquestionably the sole catalyst responsible for pulling our small town library from decades of low funding and inadequate facilities into the embodiment of a vibrant 21st century community center. Not only has she made a major impact on our library, but Rosemary's creativity and effective planning have generated a dynamic energy of involvement within our community, as organizations throughout the area reach out and depend on Rosemary, recognizing her as an exceptional community leader. Whatever it is: if it's important and it's happening in the Warwick area, then Rosemary opens the Library doors and has a major role in the success of the endeavor.

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?

Among a vast array of vital library endeavors, Rosemary created programs to cater to and showcase Warwick as a vibrant art community. Incredibly helpful for me was a monthly program she established featuring a single artist, exhibiting a themed presentation of their work in the library's gallery space, providing opportunities for artists to discuss and showcase their art. As a photographer, I spent years studying and refining my skills so that my photography represents the best I have to offer in my artistic endeavors. However, I limited myself when it came to the next important step—exhibiting, discussing and selling my photographs. After seeing my work, Rosemary approached me about presenting an exhibit in the gallery space. The benefits I received from her support and encouragement are difficult to express in the 800-word limitation here. They are manifold. First, and probably foremost, she encouraged me to trust my instincts and follow where they led me in focusing on an exhibition theme. Self-trust is arguably the most precious gift anyone can be given, artist or otherwise. She cleverly combined my display of regional bird photography with literature on our local section of the famous Appalachian Trail. Incorporating my work with material that fostered a deep appreciation of the natural world made me feel part of a larger community, encouraging my neighbors to explore the natural beauty of our area. Rosemary's inspiration and help was not only psychologically and artistically uplifting, but was hands-on as well. With pliers and tools

in hand, she made herself available to me to help hang and design the layout of the exhibit, even climbing up ladders as needed.

Another fine example of Rosemary's help that has benefited not just me on a personal level, but was also a solid outreach to the community, is when she asked me to collaborate on a special collection of materials on mental illness and emotional wellbeing, a collection that was purely Rosemary's brainchild. She intuited a need to gather information on this sensitive and much-needed topic in one semi-private area of the Library, creating a safe place for individuals and family members to get reliable and timely information about mental health issues from books and local mental health professionals and organizations. I felt particularly honored to be asked by her to develop a series of photographs that would complement the collection and lend an aura of calm and peace to the reading area. This project had a profound impact on me, giving me the satisfaction of knowing that my art was contributing to something that was making a real difference in the lives of others. Rosemary took the mental health collection to the next level when she invited me to be a key speaker at an educational session she organized about the special collection for local mental health professionals and civic leaders, asking me to speak on the healing power of art. Thanks to these and many other experiences like them, I am much more secure in my abilities to accomplish whatever personal and professional goals I establish. It deserves repeating that Rosemary's strong support and respect for my art did more to bring me to a level of valuing my own work as an artist than anything else I can possibly imagine. And the most wonderful thing about it was that in bringing me to a higher level of confidence and self-respect, she crafted it in such a way that others were helped in more ways than we could possibly ever know.

I am just one of more than 60 artists that have exhibited in the Library's galleries and am confident that Rosemary's positive, comprehensive, and thoughtful approach was felt by each of the exhibiting artists. I look to Rosemary as an example of what people can do to help others and the community we live in. She has instilled in me a desire to follow her lead and use my time in service to my community. Rosemary has made that even easier for me by creating many meaningful programs at the Library to choose from to do just that. Thanks to her I have become a much better photographer, reader, citizen, neighbor and—hopefully—writer.

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

This is probably the easiest question within this entire series and could quickly be answered by any person who lives in and around Warwick. If you mention Warwick to someone from outside our area, people often respond about what a fantastic library we have and they mention Rosemary Cooper by name. In fact, I spoke to someone who lives in the neighboring town of Goshen, who told me that she and her husband have considered moving to Warwick because of our library, a distinction that stems from Rosemary's leadership. She has a deep understanding of our community and has touched the heart of it in so many ways.

When Hurricane Sandy barreled down on New York State, the Warwick area was badly hit, riddled with downed trees, power outages and washed out roads. People were without

power, some for as many as ten days. This was compounded by the fact that there was a severe gasoline shortage for our cars and generators. The community flocked to the Library for heat, electricity, and to use the Library's computers to contact loved ones. Realizing the importance of the Library as a source of comfort and shelter, Rosemary extended the regular operating hours to provide a literal refuge from the storm for area residents. This example of her ability to make a visible and meaningful impact on our community is a good one to symbolize the essence of the vital contributions she consistently makes, not just for one group or subset but for the diverse population that makes up Warwick.

One of Rosemary's strengths that contribute to her impact in our area and her remarkable success as the driving force behind developing a library that has become the hub of our community is her active collaboration with community organizations. For example, she has strengthened the Library's partnership with schools in such a way that she has been credited by school officials as integrating the Library into the academic life of the over 3,500 K-12 grade students that live in the Warwick Valley Central School District.

When lack of funding forced the local school district to cancel all field trips, Rosemary worked in collaboration with other groups to obtain special permission from the school superintendent for teachers to use school buses to transport children to the Library to attend a remarkable program series on the importance of writing and tolerance, as taught through the life of Anne Frank. Through Rosemary's efforts, our library was the first venue in the United States to host the Reading and Writing with Anne Frank program, developed by the Anne Frank Center. As a volunteer docent and photographer for this program, I saw and heard firsthand the tremendous influence the activities and presentations had on the school children. Many could relate personally to the value of writing as a means of expressing themselves and as a way of speaking out against bullying or other aspects of injustice in their own lives.

Rosemary is constantly working at keeping herself up to date on upcoming issues, topics or available programs that are relevant; presenting services and information that interact with the community on multiple levels, programs that touch on every part of the diverse social and demographic sectors within our community. This openness is not limited to civic leaders or established organizations. In a very remarkable and active way, Rosemary is open to testing grassroots-initiated ideas coming from people "walking in off the street."

Beverly Braxton is the founder of Family Central, one of those grassroots programs, that provides a support network for parents and caregivers of children from birth through adolescence to counteract a host of social trends undermining the well being of families. Beverly describes Rosemary as "why the community sees the Library as a dynamic place of possibility. It is because of her belief in the Library as a place where ordinary people can bring their ideas, and a place that offers information about their concerns. Rosemary has her 'ear to the ground' in terms of what the community's needs and concerns are and how the Library can help address them."

Because Family Central is a young all-volunteer organization that is not yet established enough to have their own 501(c)(3) status, they have limited access to funding. Rosemary has shared her administrative capacity with them to help advertise their events, including them in the Library's print and electronic programs bulletin, sending special announcements to the local newspapers, creating flyers and posters, and setting up on-line pre-registration on the website for all of their events. Rosemary even offered to help Family Central create a needs-assessment survey for members on their listserv.

Rosemary Cooper continues to make a difference in our community and we owe a great debt to her for that.

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

I have to say, unabashedly, that our library is incomparable. And, as a result, I live in a community that reaps the benefits of that in a multitude of ways. All of which, benefit my quality of life. I have lived throughout the United States and have never lived near a library that has come close to ours in quality, breadth and depth of services. That accomplishment is in no small way thanks to the outstanding leadership of its director, Rosemary Cooper.

Mayor Michael Newhard said in a public address that the library has "blown open its walls to become a community center." Michael Sweeton, Warwick Town Supervisor calls it "the heart of our rural/suburban agricultural valley...the anchor of our vibrant town." I call it my go-to place for books, classes, entertainment and education.

My understanding of different cultures has been enhanced by attending a traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony, taking classes in Spanish, learning the meditative art of calligraphy, and availing myself to the multi-cultural events at the Library. It is as if I have a university available to me at no cost, other than my small library tax. Rosemary has managed to do much with little funding, developing a network of financial support through an active Friends of the Library group, a foundation, and numerous grants.

Rosemary has instilled in me a desire to volunteer and give in service to my community. One of the ways I do that is to volunteer my time at the Library to record a reading of our local newspaper for the visually impaired. Along with the satisfaction of knowing that I am helping people that might not otherwise be able to keep current on local news and events, I make new friends and create new connections through my involvement with the Library.

I have an elderly parent that lives with me. The benefits of volunteerism are great for any age, but they are a wonderful way for senior citizens to remain socially active, helping to maintain good emotional health and cognitive abilities. Under Rosemary's tutelage the volunteer program involves up to 100 community members, ranging from age 12 to 92. In improving my mother's quality of life, mine is improved as well.

My life is richer because of the ways the Library, and Rosemary in particular, makes my community a better place to live. In a town without a cultural center or theater, the

Library is the community's center for low-or no-cost entertainment. Like the nostalgic, old-fashioned America represented in a Norman Rockwell painting, young and old, as well as new and longtime residents gather together for events at the Library throughout the year. Whenever I drive by the library it is a common sight to see the large library parking lot filled to capacity.

Well-informed and educated citizens are the bedrock of a successful community. This type of involved, knowledgeable and active community is where I want to live. Library volunteers place bookshelves in key areas such as senior housing, migrant labor centers and the local food bank, keeping them stocked with new titles. Thus, bringing the joys and benefits of reading to populations that might otherwise not be able to take advantage of what the Library has to offer.

Any improvement in the economic status of where I live has a direct impact on my quality of life in a positive way. To that end, and indicative of Rosemary's style of collaboration with library patrons, Rosemary began a program directed toward improving the lot of many people who were losing their jobs during the country's economic downturn four years ago. She began this by accepting an idea from Gregg Knowles, a member of our community, to develop a career help program to counsel people who were in transition or unemployed. This program became known as the Career Transition Program (CTAP) and has recently received special recognition from the New York State Legislature. CTAP includes job coaching, interview skills and personal resume review. The program has helped many people in Warwick who have lost their jobs and found themselves in a completely different job market. This innovative program is so successful that many other libraries within our library system have adopted it.

These stories exemplify the many ways that Rosemary, through her skillful and devoted direction of the Albert Wisner Public Library, has improved my life and the lives of those around me. As Thomas Roberts, proprietor of our local book store, Ye Olde Warwick Book Shoppe, colorfully puts it, "Without the Albert Wisner Library [led by Rosemary Cooper] I'm afraid we'd be just another empty village with the ghosts of Austen, Cervantes, Dickens, Joyce, Voltaire, Fitzgerald and countless others knocking on the soaped-up windows of our minds, blowing on the tumble weeds of our atrophied brain cells."

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

Rosemary recognizes that the Library has a unique opportunity to strengthen services for people with disabilities. Special needs children and their behaviors can create the necessity for a different skillset from the Library staff. Responding to this need, Rosemary reached out to a special educator in our school district and arranged for a workshop to train her staff on how to best work with and serve those children. Whether at the desk, in the stacks, or during an event, the staff is prepared to provide support and inclusive programming with sensitivity and knowledgeable skill.

Artists represent another population with a subset of special needs, especially where lighting is concerned. As an artist, I'm particularly sensitive to the spaces where my work

is presented. A great photograph can become drab and unexciting when the lighting is wrong. Not only can the light cast shadows or glare, but it can also go a long way in a positive sense to create an ambiance that complements an exhibition. Rosemary's understanding of the importance of this element in the Library's support to our vibrant art community led her to investigate new lighting for their art displays and arrange for the installation of special gallery lighting. Not only does it make me pleased to display my own work, but it enhances my enjoyment of other exhibitions as well.

Teens and young adults are often an under-represented population in a library. Rosemary has given special attention to creating a space that will encourage our young people to "hang out" and have a place to go that is a beneficial and safe environment. With the help of her staff, she created a well-used special area set aside for them with a popular blackboard wall for messages and graffiti, along with comfortable furniture for doing homework, reading or just sitting around. This effort is two-fold because the teens also make themselves available to senior citizens or other less technologically-capable people who need help with their electronic devices, like iPads, e-readers, or laptops.

In addition to making the library a better place inside, with invaluable staff training and interior improvements, Rosemary has gone beyond the Library walls to create outside areas that are welcoming and pay homage to our community's agricultural heritage. Rosemary arranged for the donation of a beautiful "agrisculptural" fountain in the outdoor reading area, personally helping with the manual labor involved in the installation. The fountain was created by sculptor Amy Lewis, who uses old farm equipment and "lovingly rethinks them to have a new function" as pieces of art. Patrons can sit on benches or at umbrella-covered tables and enjoy the ornamental trees and flowers while reading or participating in a social encounter.

She is currently working on creating an outdoor terrace stage to improve seating and listening experiences for the outdoor music concerts. She does her research when it comes to making these improvements and has traveled to commercial concert venues in the area so she can plan for the best that the Library's financial means will allow.

Of all these enhancements, improvements and additions, Rosemary herself has to be the greatest and most effective of all in making the Library an exciting and rewarding place to be. Her attitude is welcoming and all-inclusive. She opens her door to anyone who wants to visit or come in to share an idea for improvements or library programming. She has an amazing understanding and knowledge of books and literature, and quickly helps anyone who might want help in that area. She has ensured that the Library is up to date so that patrons can take advantage of current technological advancements. In short, Rosemary Cooper makes up what is best about our library, as a pillar in the community, as a force in forward thinking and advancements, and as a presence that is kind and respectful to the needs of all the members of our diverse population.