

Love Libraries Competition: Top Ten New Librarians 2007

ENTRY FORM

Name: Elizabeth McDonald

Age: 26

Length of service: 2 years 5 months

Library service: Wokingham Borough Council

- **Why have you chosen to make a career in public libraries?**

I have always had a passion for both reading and working with children and I wanted a career that would combine these two passions. My mother read to me when I was young and we went to the library every week, so libraries were firmly instilled into my life. My parents also fostered, so I was always surrounded by children of all ages, and reading stories and singing rhymes was part of our daily life. I now get to enjoy the best of both worlds by being a children's specialist.

As a child, every time I went into our local library I was always made to feel welcome and nothing was ever too difficult or too much of a problem for the staff. It was an environment that I always felt safe in and I thought it would be a great place to work. It has turned out to be a wonderfully fun and rapidly changing environment. I really feel like I can make a difference in people's lives, from a simple smile to working with young people to develop their love of reading.

- **What is it about library work that you enjoy?**

- Meeting new and different people.
- Engaging children in reading.
- Having daily customer contact – the satisfaction of being able to help people find what they are looking for.
- Recommending and promoting books in new and exciting ways to children and adults.
- Helping customers old and new and showing them that libraries have more to offer than just books.
- Organising events and book groups to encourage children to have fun with reading.
- Helping people and learning from them at the same time, giving me a sense of satisfaction and helping me to develop my own abilities.

- **Why do you think libraries are important?**

Libraries:

- Are uniquely placed to ensure that every member of society has access to the information and knowledge that they need. Libraries are neither restricted by commercial pressures to provide only certain products in the way that bookshops are, nor are they swamped by

large quantities of unhelpful and sometimes contradictory information in the way that the internet is. By compiling quality information sources in one place, there is a good chance that people may discover something that interests them when they are not actively looking for it, something which does not occur as often as people think when using the internet!

- Are essential community focal points, which are open and accessible to all.
- Are also able to provide many intangible services, by virtue of the fact that they are also meeting places and community hubs. The fact that this service is provided regardless of background or income is a great leveller in the community. It enables anyone to improve their skills and hence employment prospects through learning, or simply to enjoy greater interaction with their community through a shared interest. They also offer a relatively quiet place to gather your thoughts which is increasingly rare in modern society.
- Offer safe and warm environments, where anyone and everyone are welcome.
- Offer services that are so relevant to such a diverse range of people. They reach across the entire age range from babies to elderly people and across all ethnic groups and interests. As our society becomes more dependant on information sources, particularly independent, reliable ones (printed or digital), the role for libraries in the future should be preserved and supported. Particularly as free access to information encourages free thought and free speech, which will remain cornerstones of a democratic society such as ours. If quality information moves too far towards being a paid-for commodity, the inevitable outcome will be that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Libraries play an important role towards maintaining a healthy balance.
- Can open up a whole world of new possibilities and adventures to all.
- **What has been your biggest achievement in the role?**

I came into Wokingham Borough Council as a team librarian for children in 2005. My line manager (Community Librarian for children) then went off on maternity leave and I was given the opportunity to take on her role.

First thing that I did was to work with the Performance Review Officer to gain a clear understanding of how the young peoples stock and events were working. The statistics reinforced some of the work that was being done and some pointed to the fact that there was a need for change.

One area that was identified was the expansion of Bookstart and the need to provide an activity for families with babies. I started several rhyme time sessions across the borough in November 2005, with the help of a volunteer who was a qualified librarian with a musical background. This is despite my complete lack of singing ability! We attended training (provided by the Youth Libraries Group) and went through our rhyme collection in the library to put some sample sessions together. We felt it was the ideal way to enhance the language skills of children between the ages of 0 and 18 months through rhyme and song. The sessions also offer a great opportunity to promote the Bookstart ethos of encouraging all parents and carers to enjoy books with children from as early an age as possible.

Over the last two years we have had 1,300 parents and babies come along to our free sessions, to join in with our silly songs and rhymes and interact with our finger puppets and cuddly toy

collection. The sessions are a fun way for parents and babies to bond with each other and also give parents a chance to socialise with other parents. The monthly sessions have greatly contributed to the promotion of our libraries, with 40 articles in the local press over the last 12 months and a feature on regional television news.

Over the last year, we have increased usage of our libraries by parents and babies by five percent. There has been a particular increase in our board book issues, with board books being issued eight times more per item than any other category of children's book stock. We have now increased our spending on board books to meet the demand. We now regularly have 60 parents and babies attending the baby bounce and rhyme sessions across the borough each month.

- **How have you helped to improve your service?**

Since taking on the role as community librarian for children in June 2005, I worked with the Performance Review Officer and Promotions Development Officer to improve the services for children and young people within Wokingham Borough Libraries.

The Performance Review Officer and I looked at the statistics and identified a number of areas for improvement:

- Stock – rotation – supplier selection
- Under 5's activities – story time
- Teenage activities – warhammer, manga and non-fiction stock
- Support in branches for children's work – Summer Reading Challenge
- Children's publicity

Stock – I have worked with our Collection Development Officer to make our stock work better in our branches by weeding out and moving around collections. Our children's book issues increased by 10% last year.

I set up supplier selection with the data collected from our Library Management System and from the expertise of the supervisors in our branches.

I put together a supplier selection document, which our suppliers now work to. This system works well with all of our children's stock.

Under 5's activities – With the statistics collected it was clear that our story times were happening too frequently in some branches and not frequently enough in others. We did a mini-consultation with our story time attendees at each branch. The consultation backed-up the statistical results. We created a monthly theme, with the help of the Children's Champions and set to work with advertising the sessions.

Our Promotions Development Officer put together some posters with strong images, which really stood out. These were then sent out to a variety of locations, Parish Councils, Doctors surgeries, Family Information Centre and libraries. This has made a huge difference to the way we market our events and we now regularly get new people coming along to our story time sessions.

Teenage activities

I went on a CILIP Course about Teenagers in public libraries in 2006 and from this course; I was able to put forward the following initiatives.

- **Warhammer Club** – Now runs every two weeks in a dual use library branch with a regular attendance of 20 teenage boys. This is run in conjunction with a teenage volunteer whose main hobby is Warhammer.

- **Manga Workshops** – for 2 years now we have run Manga drawing workshops with Sonia Leong from Sweatdrop studios. This has now lead to a regular Manga group meeting each month to talk about the Manga comic series, anime and drawings that the teenagers have produced.
- **Teenage area's in branches** – We have managed to create a teenage area in our central branch. With comfortable seating and an array of library material that will appeal to them.
- **Non-fiction Stock** – There was no non-fiction stock for teenagers in libraries. I appealed to our Collection Development Officer for funding to buy a collection of good material for our 3 largest branches. This stock has helped to identify a teen area in the branches.

Summer Reading Challenges – Each year a new challenge is set and over the past two years I have managed, in conjunction with colleagues to increase the joining figures of the challenge and completion rate. We have provided more activities for a wider age range: Rhyme time and story times for the under 5's, Manga Drawing Workshop for the teenagers and an array of weird and wacky events from Discovering Wolves in one library to having slime workshops in another.

I have managed to increase the number of children that take part each year by 21% and increase the number of children that complete the challenge by 8%. But the biggest increase is the number of new members we have gained, which is 38% over the past 2 summer reading challenges.

A lot of these results are down to the fact that we now have a network of Children's Reading Champions throughout our branches. I initiated the Children's Reading Champions after we had a restructure within our department. It gives the branches more support with children's work by having 1 person in each branch that was responsible for supporting me and the branches in the children's activities. I put together a training session for the Children's Reading Champions to inspire and enthuse them in the work that they are doing and we had a brain storming session to come up with ideas for future projects.

Children's Publicity

Our new Promotions Development Officer has helped me to promote and produce fantastic new material that will attract all sorts of users. Our posters now follow a corporate brand that is fun and attractive. We even managed to get bright purple and rose pink added to the corporate colour chart, so we could use them for children's posters.

We now have attractive and vibrant posters and leaflets that are sent out to parish councils, schools, community centres etc. and libraries to publicise the services we provide. This has helped us to send out the right type of publicity to the right areas.

We have managed to get more press coverage for the activities we have been doing. Over the summer we had 75 articles in the local press and radio and television coverage. We now have a regular leaflet filled with the children's activities that are happening each month and regular slots in our local families magazines.

Challenge for the Service

There was also a need to challenge the service as a whole to see what flexibility we had in what we deliver, I put together a project based on the last ever Harry Potter book coming out. I received an achievement award for this project, from my Head of Service.

The focus of the project was to host a midnight party for families to show the flexibility of our service. We achieved this by holding a competition each week, and a winner was chosen from each branch. This resulted in 54 winners and parents coming to the midnight party at our central library.

We raised the profile of the library with sponsorship from our local paper, which gave us extensive press coverage and a radio interview on BBC Radio Berkshire. I also managed to get sponsorship from our local Tesco, Bookshop, Party shop and Theatre Company. I created a webpage specifically to promote the Harry Potter event. This was the first time we were able to do this and it was viewed 1,215 times over a two-month period.

During the period of the promotion, there was a daily increase of 8% in library usage.

100% of children and adults rated the Midnight party as very good.

The comments received highlighted the following:

- Good organisation – “Great fun, well organised”; “Very well organised and thought out”
- Staff commitment – “Great event, very impressed that staff were willing to stay up till midnight”
- Suitability for all ages – “It was very good for all ages, we both enjoyed it”
- The originality of the idea – “Very original and exciting for the children”
- Enjoyable for children – children’s own comments included: “Excellent good”; “Bewitching”; “It was very cool”; “Fab, brill, could not have been better”; “I liked the decorations” “ The end of term paled into insignificance”

I managed to enthuse enough staff to:

- Dress up like characters from Harry Potter
- Open up the library out of hours
- Move the shelving around to create a more open flexible space for a party
- Decorate the library in a gothic Harry Potter theme
- Help run the whole evening from silly party games, making magic spell chains and teaching them magic tricks.

• **Why do you deserve to be recognised as a Top Ten New Librarian?**

I’m a bubbly, skittish and enthusiastic person. I am passionate about the job that I do and I care so much about the services we provide for the young people of today. I want to make a difference in young peoples lives and it enriches my life in the work that I do with them.

I deserve to be recognised as a top librarian as I am currently inspiring teenagers, children, toddlers and babies to get reading and come into libraries.

I am singing songs, reading stories, bouncing along to rhyme time and encouraging children to take part in the Summer Reading Challenge.

I feel that working in public libraries is a challenging and rewarding experience.

The future of public libraries is a rapidly changing environment and it is important to look to the future and ensure the library service is up to date with the relevant skills needed from professional staff. I thrive in a changing environment and am always looking for ways to improve and move the library service forward. I enjoy contributing suggestions and ideas on the YLG JISC Mailing list and attending YLG events. It gives me a chance to share, inspire and enthuse others and myself in the work that we do with young people and children in today’s modern libraries.

It is very rewarding to see children enjoying, sharing and enthusing about books.
Plus I get to jump around, read children's books, play silly games and I get paid for it!