

Love Libraries Competition: Top Ten New Librarians 2007

ENTRY FORM

Name: Laura Warnock

Age: 29

Length of service (three years maximum): 1 year

Library service: Sunderland Public Libraries

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

After working in museums for 4 years I had the good fortune to begin working with libraries as part of my role as a Regional Literacy Officer. Through this post I began to realise the potential that libraries have as a community resource and information service and what an important part of a community they can prove to be. I felt that libraries had huge unrecognised potential in what they could develop into and how this countered the traditional view that many people hold of libraries. When the post of Community Health Officer was advertised it immediately appealed to me as an innovative post, that showed the recognition that libraries were being given and had the potential to make great inroads into developing the library for its users within the community.

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

I enjoy the community feel that libraries promote; the way that everything they do is to enhance others lives. I enjoy seeing people who have not been in a library since they were small, who have preconceived ideas about a library, come along to an event or activity that has been organised and then become repeat visitors who get a genuine benefit from using the library and realise what a positive effect this can have on their lives and quality of life. This is particularly relevant in the case of the substance misuse client group who I work with. Below is a quote that I received from a previous non user which sums this up:

'I joined the library today and I got a book out about jewellery making which I have really enjoyed. We go to the library every week with the group but I have started to go up by myself and just sit and read and chill out which helps me out loads cause before I would have just been sitting in the house completely depressed. It has really helped me get out more and feel like a normal human being'

I enjoy being able to encourage people into libraries and seeing them discover what is actually available for them within their local community.

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

Libraries are an important part of any community and have a duty as a public service to define their service to the needs of the users. Libraries are one of the few resources within the community that provide a safe and non judgemental space and not enough people are aware of this and assume the

focus is solely on books. Of course this is a hugely important part of the library service but there is so much more on offer. I have been working with clients over the past year whose feedback has demonstrated evidence to support this, mothers talking about places to bring their children and individuals speaking about a place 'that made me feel wanted and that things were achievable'.

To me these comments support what I believe that libraries can have a positive, profound effect upon an individual's quality of life and there are few places, open to all and everyone that can say this.

Libraries are also an added benefit to the community in providing information. My post has built on this resource by promoting health information. To me the fact that libraries can provide such a great deal of information is a great enhancement to any community, as they are so much more friendly and unimposing than, for example, GPs surgeries or clinics.

- **What has been your biggest achievement in the role?**

There are a number of things that make me feel like I have achieved something through this post, but I think perhaps one of the best was the realisation that the work we have been doing over the past year has had an impact on peoples lives and has made a difference to individuals as well as groups. We have increased satisfaction for users by developing our services according to their needs.

This quote was received from a lady who only saw her daughter once a week and wanted to spend some quality time with her. The lady in question was taking part in a jewellery making course in the library; 'I brought my little un along today because I know that she'd love jewellery making. I only get contact with her once a week and I haven't got much money so to do something like this is a treat for her but it's also a weight off my mind cause I don't need to worry about finding money that I haven't got to take her out somewhere. It's a great thing because it's about spending time with my daughter, taking her somewhere safe and not having to worry about anything'

I think this quote does sum up just how much a library can do for an individual and that libraries can offer more than just a book. Also by encouraging these hard to reach groups and individuals to attend we are encouraging greater and widespread use of the library. Through this post we have been contacting people who have never been into a library or not since they were children and now not only are they attending they are bringing their own children, creating positive memories that will form a basis for the future client group of libraries.

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

There are several ways that this post has helped to improve our service. One of these is by working with and bringing in hard to reach groups, specifically focusing on the substance misuse client group. We have worked closely with this client group to develop services according to their needs, and used their experiences to raise awareness with library staff in regards to substance misuse and attitudes and perceptions.

We have created a sense of community cohesion with these groups by getting them to see that their library is a place in their community that belongs to them, and by encouraging the development of resources such as crafts, to develop the users as a group and getting them to interact with other members of the community. This also allows the other members of the community to overcome any perceptions regarding hard to reach groups, in particular the client group mentioned, enabling us to break down barriers on both sides. Also with these groups we have been developing a greater awareness of services that we can provide and deliver to those who most require it. I also feel that this post has helped take the service to the user groups, rather than trying to encourage them to

come to us. We have sought them and invited them, making them realise they are valued members of the community who are missing out on a service that is there for them.

We have created stronger and wider partnerships across Sunderland, with the substance misuse service providers, the STPCT (Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust), mental health workers and women's workers to name just a few of our partners.

We have been aiming to break down barriers to those that have not been using Sunderland Libraries. The barriers that people describe in using libraries can appear to be challenging, but by drawing people in and making them realise this is 'their' service we can both overcome these barriers and develop a service that is most relevant to their needs by addressing what they see as issues and problems, but also by letting them know that libraries have changed over the years and are continuing to develop services.

One of the major barriers we have perceived was the traditional view of a library. We have encouraged groups to challenge this view and encourage them to use our services to help them to realise this is not the case.

- **Why do you deserve to be recognised as a Top Ten New Librarian?** (250 words max)

Mums who have struggled with drugs bringing their daughters to the library for a special time together... victims of substance misuse proudly showing off their cookery and health qualifications... youngsters at risk of offending composing songs in the library about health and lifestyles choices ..., I have seen all this as the country's first library-based community health officer.

I am passionate about the role public libraries can play in community development and information services and know that libraries can design their services to improve quality of life for clients.

I joined the library team in September 2006 to target a substance misuse client group to aid their rehabilitation, encourage self-help, and increase library usage and user satisfaction. My remit includes setting up a library-based health information service.

I have:

- launched a Books on Prescription scheme with 54 doctors' practices
- engaged with 1,736 people including 663 substance misuse clients and 94 children
- organised training for library staff in customer relations with substance misuse clients
- seen 373 visits to accredited cookery classes
- hosted library-based courses including nail art and decoupage
- encouraged people onto ICT basic skills courses
- arranged an open day for clients
- held men's health MOTs in libraries
- achieved very positive customer feedback
-and am now setting up a garden allotment with clients!

I've been a library member since I was small and while books are important, public libraries are great places for really making a difference in people's lives.