

# Love Libraries Competition: Top Ten New Librarians 2007

## ENTRY FORM

**Name:** Phyll Smith

**Age:** 36

**Length of service (three years maximum):** 10 months

**Library service:** North East Lincolnshire

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

Any job in which one is equipped to help individuals and affect real change in communities has to be both rewarding and worthwhile. As a front line librarian working amongst an informed and diverse staff, with a hugely varied customer base with ever changing needs, one is in a position with a little patience and effort, to satisfy 99% of those unique needs very quickly – between the chaos of customer demands and the order of shelving, filing, archiving and research, is both a stimulating process of problem solving, and the instant reward of the thanks and gratitude of the customer. And the occasional Dundee cake. Why wouldn't anyone want to work in libraries?

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

In a small library such as ours, the change the library can make upon the communities that use it is very apparent. While the thanks of a grateful customer may be fleeting, the ripple effect through their community is ever growing – seeing the work of a new author one has introduced move from friend to friend perhaps; the results of a library user's school essay, job application, business plan or immigration claim; or a new practical interest promoted in the library capturing the attention of a previously apathetic or disruptive group. One can take real pride in having played some small part in that process.

Seeing the fruits of one's labour changing the community is wonderfully rewarding – seeing those who are socially isolated, through age, illness, poverty, depression or whatever, establish friendships and social capital through their newly shared interests and knowledge; seeing the behaviour of a group change and become more healthy, polite, accepting or creative because of the library's influence.

For example, to encourage older library users back into the library, we created an online database of old school photographs. I then hosted a number of slide shows where we shared information and stories about characters in the pictures, and reunited old friends for the first time in years. From this a book of reminiscences of the estate's early years has been produced, which along with displays in the library, has created a sense of history amongst many of the younger people. This has in turn fostered much intergenerational library use, with youngsters showing their grandparents how to use the online photos and add their own stories and comments.

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

The library is at the centre of the community, and it is where communities can come together. The library performs two functions which allow it to be a catalyst for this, it is on one hand full of information – which can in turn inform, educate or entertain. So are many other institutions - television or the internet could make the same claim. But the library is also full of individuals, each with their own knowledge, interests and social network, and as these individuals - empowered by the services the library can give, meet, talk, clash, agree and act together, that is where the community happens, where inclusion is effected and social change becomes a reality.

We live increasingly in what is referred to as the 'Information Age', where one's worth and ability to succeed is defined by one's access to information. Of course it has always been so, knowledge is power. But today the emphasis is not upon the depth and accuracy of your information, but upon the speed at which that can be accessed, and the intellectual tools you have to access it. As such, more and more people are becoming socially, economically and aspirationally deprived through information exclusion. Whilst the IT revolution may for many make libraries seem anachronistic, for those whom the revolution has left behind, they become more and more vital – and for those who are most IT dependent, it is the verifiable, referenced and accredited online and digital services provided by libraries which are the essential tools of quality research.

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

Seeing a large group of children 'excited' about salad. The children in our catchment area have a (largely undeserved) reputation for disaffection, disruption and negativity. Our gardening project has allowed young people of various ages to work together for a single aim and realise that they are stronger and more effective as a team. It has given them a project in which they see long term goals realised, and in which they can acquire, use and pass on new knowledge very rapidly, building their self-esteem and social skills, and channelling their sometimes wayward energies into positive and creative ends. What is more it has provided a group of children who demographically have the worst diets, with an interest in, and a sense of ownership over growing, preparing and eating fresh vegetables, often for the first time. Seeing kids literally jumping up and down when they see the first beans emerging on their plants, explaining to each other how to transplant or prune a plant, or even eating their first fresh tomato or arguing over recipes for salad dressing, has sometimes left me close to tears. At the same time the lasting effect of these youngsters working alongside horticultural students, giving them an insight into further education, and the wider community seeing these children (through the short films they have made themselves within the library, broadcast on television and streamed online) constructively and creatively occupied, helps defeat the restraints of stereotyping which stops many of these bright individuals from achieving their potential.

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

The library has always been popular with young people with, essentially, nowhere else to go. Added to this is now our new constituency of students. We have worked hard to engage these young people so their presence in the library does not dissuade other groups from using us. In setting up a 'myspace' site for the library I have managed to annexe the

youngsters' social networking obsession to the library's benefit, and draw teenagers and young adults into other library activities, while providing an informal gateway into the libraries online services for students.

To bring disaffected users back in, I instigated a parent and toddler group, to encourage a 'family' atmosphere in the library, providing a social service for young mums and families new to the area. This has brought in new library users and we are now helping improve literacy levels, both through Bookstart and through our developing video resources to help parents, perhaps with literacy issues of their own, to help their children to read.

As part of our regional literature festival I have organised a 'Poetry on the Estate' event, in which we are encouraging local people to write and read poetry with the help of workshops and surgeries from local and nationally recognised poets. I also had the idea to promote the work of poets after whom the estates' streets are named, and we are about to go onto the streets with film crews asking the local people 'what does poetry mean to you?'. In addition to this I have organised a major exhibition for the Festival on local writer Tom Wintringham, whose internationally significant legacy is now largely forgotten. Through the exhibition and related talks I will be promoting both a local character in whom the community have a stake as one of their own, and the area's literary heritage on a national scale.

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

If I do deserve to be recognised as a 'Top Librarian' it is because I am representative of the team in which I work. I work so closely with the rest of the branch team that our efforts, ideas and actions are sometimes difficult to distinguish. With the help and support of other branches equally committed to progressive library work, we are ever eager to work together to promote and share good and innovative ideas. Our management teams are flexible enough to adapt, accept and allow those ideas to develop and flourish, even if sometimes they may seem a little crackpot. Video production and cabbages are not the traditional fare of libraries, but we have seen returns in terms of visitor numbers, behaviour and issue figures within the library, and incrementally a gradual improvement in the quality of life of those on the estate.

Whilst many of the teenagers coming into the library for the first time, aspire to nothing more than being leaders of the local gang or reality TV stars, with our help and time they may soon aspire to be directors, gardeners, students, or teachers. In the meantime the constant stream of youngsters wanting to be library assistants would indicate that we are doing something, however incremental, towards that.