

OPINION

My love letter to Long Island's libraries



Patrick Eannotti of Glen Cove holds his 10-month-old daughter, Quinn, as she is fingerprinted for a photo identification card at the Glen Cove Library on Feb. 4, 2017. Credit: Barry Sloan

By Gina Siple

August 13, 2017

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Almost anything that has ever brought me great joy began with a trip to the library.

When I was small, my mother and I would walk from Garden City South to our local library in Franklin Square, a little over two miles round-trip, because we didn't always have access to a reliable car. Walking hand in hand was both the most efficient and most enjoyable way to get anywhere. It was at story time for children that both my mother and I made lasting friendships.

Today, I am fortunate to live around the corner from the Gold Coast Library in Glen Head and a two-mile walk to the Sea Cliff Children's Library. My 18-month-old son, Colin, and I find ourselves in Sea Cliff several times a week, meeting and making friends. That's the thing that many people don't understand — a library is more than books, it's a community.

Sure, the library was the place where I was introduced to Judy Blume novels and — yes, I'm totally embarrassed to admit it — the juicy Sweet Valley High series. But it was also the place where I learned origami and cartooning, and got my first email address in 1997.

At the library, friends and I learned how to research colleges and search for scholarships on the internet. It's also where we exchanged emails with boys we met at out-of-state Model UN conferences. Because we didn't have email access at home, we raced to the library after school to check our messages in eager anticipation of a flirty reply.

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The library was the place where we sometimes giggled too loudly, and where the librarians knew us by name.

Their knowing our names wasn't a bad thing. When I came home from my first semester at Binghamton University, Mary LaRosa, the young adult librarian at the Franklin Square library, offered me one of my first teaching jobs. I taught creative writing to kids, who, like me, would later become first-generation college graduates.

This job transitioned over the years into my teaching a wide range of classes at the library, from writing to coding. The classes always drew a wild mix of kids from different grades and social groups. Kids who wouldn't normally hang out together found themselves making connections for a few hours. More than learning to code, they learned how to get along. And me? I learned that I wanted to teach.

In the reading workshop I now teach at Nassau Community College, my students are often amazed that they can check out books free of charge via their smartphones and virtually visit a variety of Long Island libraries.

Although I encourage them to visit their local libraries in person, their work, school and family obligations leave them little leisure time. For students who often struggle to buy books, the OverDrive app used by Nassau and Suffolk county public libraries, as well as the college library, makes their homework easier by helping them find resources.

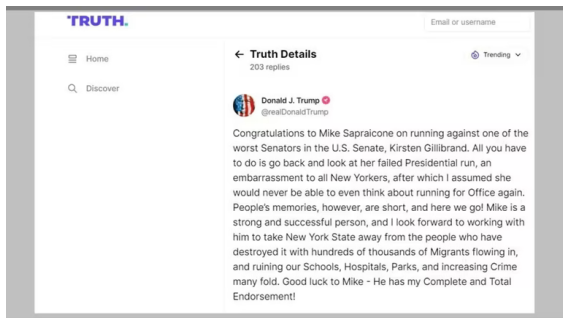
My students surreptitiously read books on the app when there is a slow moment at work. They read while commuting on the bus. Then they plug in their earbuds on the walk home and listen to audio versions. Even though they can't always easily visit their local libraries, the library is always with them.

I don't do much reading on my phone, but I, too, carry the library with me through my experiences.

The library gave me access to a world beyond my neighborhood — going away to college upstate, graduate school on the West Coast, and living abroad — but also made me proud of where I come from. Long Island's extensive system of libraries is one of our greatest assets — one well worth our public investment.

Reader Gina Siplely lives in Glen Head.

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