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Beyond literacy: Libraries as community centers



By Joseph A. Curtatone

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With so many transformative projects under way in Somerville – from the expansion of the Green Line to the development of Assembly Square to the East Broadway reconstruction – it’s easy to overlook the equally critical progress we’ve been making in an area that not all that long ago seemed at risk: the libraries.

Just over a year ago, we announced the Somerville Public Library system was in danger of needing to close one of its three branches. But residents spoke up. You told us just how much the library means to you, and we listened. Over the past year and a half, we have instead added librarians, extended hours to weekends for the first time since the 1970s, raised funds for the opening of the new Teen Room in our main branch and renovated the children’s room in our West Branch.

Meanwhile, programming continues to thrive, and expand. Thousands of residents come to our lectures, workshops and programs from language development for infants to computer basics for seniors. The Central Library now even offers free meditation sessions. In short, the libraries

are bustling with services every resident should know about. And in the 21st century, this expansion simply makes sense.

Libraries today still serve the critical role of fostering reading and literacy and protecting intellectual freedom. In Somerville, however, our libraries are increasingly serving as community hubs, as centers of learning and civic engagement. Yes, residents come by the thousands to pick up storybooks, great novels, music, or films. But in any given week, you'll also likely find our libraries hosting immigrants learning English as a Second Language, preschoolers gathered for story times, school kids crafting cool art projects, or job seekers learning career search skills.

And it's not by chance. Under the enthusiastic guidance of our Director of Libraries, Maria Carpenter, and with the support of our committed Library trustees as well as the Friends of the Somerville Public Library, we are developing our libraries into vibrant cultural centers and models for the library of the future. And for this we are gaining national notice.

Just last month, the respected national publication *Library Journal* featured our innovative new Awesome Box program, and the news spread nationally via Twitter. Via this innovation but simple joint program with Harvard University, residents can drop their favorite library books into a special "Awesome Box" at the returns desk, and librarians then swipe them in and automatically send the recommendation to a webpage that others can then review for reading recommendations.

Last week, we were also honored to be selected as one of just ten libraries in the nation to receive a Storycorps grant from the American Libraries Association and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. This means Somerville librarians will be trained to document your stories for posterity (just as the Storycorps stories you may have heard on *National Public Radio* are doing). It is always important to remember where you came from, and now, thanks to this national grant, a wide array of Somerville voices will have the opportunity to be heard. Not only will we not forget them but, perhaps, neither will the world.

The expansion of library services in terms of additional hours, staff, and programming is just the beginning for us. To outfit our students and residents with the tools to delve into and navigate today's world and workplace, we also continue to expand services. Our selection of digital tools continues to grow, with our electronic databases now offering the historical *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* archives for the purposes of historical research, and *Learning Express* now available for job

seekers and test preparation. We are also striving to make our libraries forums for public discourse of the arts, humanities, and sciences, from the serious to the lighthearted.

Our next series of cultural programming will touch upon the Muslim-American experience, thanks in part to a grant from the American Library Association and National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the Muslim Journeys project. The Library is partnering with scholars and clerics from Harvard, Tufts, Northeastern and many of the fine mosques in the area to present a developed and comprehensive picture of the Islamic experience. This series is founded upon the idea of tolerance, and no doubt will continue our mission in Somerville to celebrate our diversity, and through doing so, enrich the community at large.

We have our residents, Library Board of Trustees, Friends of the SPL, community partners, and library staff to thank for seizing the enormous potential that our libraries can offer. Our libraries are a place where Somervillians can come together to celebrate their past and present through the stories that surround them. We hope that our residents will learn as much from the people around them as they do from the media and resources available.

So keep an eye out for all of the new and exciting programs going on at the libraries. Creative writing workshops for teens and adults begin this month and are funded in part by the Somerville Arts council and the Friends of the Library. After school homework help has just begun for teens thanks to student volunteers from Tufts University. Job searching and computer workshops will also take place in the near future, thanks to a grant from the Tufts Neighborhood Service Fund. Our librarians will soon offer workshops on digital resources such as *Learning Express* and historical *New York Times*. And our one city-one book program, Somerville reads, is coming up too and the selected book will be announced before summer vacations begin.

With our community engaged, as I've seen so many times before, we can quickly make the Somerville Public Library a center where oral history, intellectual discovery and community fun can come together to make our libraries a national model. We hope you'll be a part of this.