

Put on Hold: Libraries Persevere Throughout Quarantine and Beyond

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There is a magic of being inside of a library while it is raining outside. Water hits the glass paned windows like the sound of rocks hitting pavement, almost to the point one worries about them breaking and ruining the books on the shelves two feet away. With no patrons around, the sound is amplified throughout the empty library, echoes of rain flow through the shelves stacked with spine-cracked books. The silence is interrupted by Joanne Fralick, the lone librarian on duty, who is on the phone with tech support complaining about the new printer.

“It will only print in color and two sided. And it's just, it's using up the toner. We got it a month ago and we already have to replace the black toner cartridge that costs \$85.” She holds the phone up to her ear, her other hand flipping through papers on her desk piled high with returned books. “The color ink costs \$109.99 for each cartridge so I have to order each cartridge. You can help me with that, right?” Fralick's free hands goes to her forehead, the frustration of the task at hand starting to show on her face. Clear plastic tubs full of books are on the floor in front of her desk labeled “returned” with a sticky note on the front saying “Do today!” in bright red marker.

The Sharon Springs Free Library in Sharon Springs, New York, has been set up to follow the Centers for Disease Control's social distance recommendations for the coronavirus. Masks are required to be worn by everyone inside and hand sanitizer is available around every corner. The wooden tables and chairs are covered with thick plastic sheets and placed six feet away from each other. The three computers, formerly five, are staggered at individual desks with the keyboard and mouse covered with a protective, easy to clean plastic. “Even before the pandemic, there weren't tons of people in here, maybe 20 at most at one point during the summer.” Fralick says, looking around at the open area where the tables are placed. “Because of the pandemic, we don't have more than two or three people in here at the same time looking for books. Sometimes

the computers are used. Before COVID there would be many times in the late afternoon where they'd all be busy with kids surfing the web when their parents were finding books. It just depends. Occasionally there are people who use the computers, but recently it is more of a ghost town in here.”

Sharon Springs, which is located an hour west from Albany, has only 563 residents and more cow farms than stores. The most exciting thing nearby is the Walmart distribution center. But this town's library is one of the few public libraries in the region that has fully reopened to the public during the pandemic. “We are still ordering new books,” says Fralick. “We haven't ordered any movies because there's really not anything coming out. But our regular patrons are really glad to have us open again anyways.”

During the statewide shutdown of all non-essential establishments mandated by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in March of 2020, the Mohawk Valley Library System board decided to keep their employees on the payroll, which included Fralick. “I would come in for a few hours by myself and would go through all the videos and you know just clean them up.” Fralick says, placing a book back on top of one of the stacks on her desk. “Book and movie cases were bent or broken and things like that. I just spent time taking books, going through them and taking a look at them, making sure they were still in good quality. It was really quiet by myself but the library director Helen joined a few times. It was nice to see someone other than my husband!”

Many of the events the library used to host are no longer able to meet. “We had a knitting and crocheting club on Friday nights every week,” Fralick explains. “We had several women that would come to that, but it hasn't started back up here. One of the reasons we haven't started it is because the two main people that were really the regulars are on opposite ends of the political

polls and had this big fight on Facebook. We don't even know if they'll want to come to the same knitting group anymore.” Other events that the library had offered were jewelry-making classes, a local musician who would come and sing to children once a week, and even outside activities with animals that would travel from the Utica Zoo. All events are currently on hold.

The library is slowly starting up in-person events again, starting with a book discussion group that meets on Friday evenings. Helen Thomas, the director of the Sharon Springs library, first attempted to hold this event online when the library was still shut down. “No one wanted to participate,” Thomas says. “It was really upsetting at the time; in retrospect I understand. Parents have to deal with Zoom for their kids and for work and would rather have some peace and quiet at the end of the day rather than more screen time. I'm glad that we have interest in the in-person discussion, though.”

An ad was put in the local paper for parents to call if they wanted a librarian to read their child a story over a video call. “No one called,” Fralick said. “But I have one mom who brings in her little 3-year-old frequently and when they come in, I usually sit over there with her and read a story to her in the children's room. The first time they came in after we opened up again, her mom came over and said, “I really would like to know if you could read a book for her,” so I did.” Before the pandemic, Fralick would hold a weekly group session for children where she would read to them. Around five to 12 children would be brought by their parents for this event. Fralick now uploads videos of her reading a book to the library’s Facebook page once a week. “I wish that I was reading to the kids in person,” Says Fralick. “But I'm just happy to still be able to bring these stories to the kids in the community.”

After multiple phases of reopening New York state, public libraries were able to begin giving their communities access to their resources. Many public libraries created book drop-off programs where books ordered online would be packaged and set aside to be picked up on the curb outside of participating libraries. Patrons are permitted to pick up their book orders and drop them off when finished, preferably before the return date. For many libraries, overdue fines were suspended but return dates were still strongly encouraged. If someone wants an extension for a specific book, they have to call the library and speak with a librarian first. Since some books are being requested by multiple patrons at one time, not all libraries will allow extensions.

In Albany County, grey plastic shed-like buildings were brought in to be utilized by the Guilderland Public Library for their book drop off site. “They look ugly but if it means we can be there for the community again, it’s worth it.” says Cathy Parotie, a book collector volunteer at the Guilderland Public Library. When patrons drop off their read books, Parotie takes them with gloved hands and inspects the books, looking for any damage that the books could have endured like torn pages or water damage. “If I ever find something, which is rare but still happens, I write down who just had that book and we put them on a list to keep an eye on. We sometimes call it “Guilderland’s Most Wanted” you know, like how the cops have a list like that.” These books get placed inside a plastic tub with a label of the returned date on the outside. The tub then is placed on a shelf alongside other returned books tubs. The sheds that they are kept in keep out any rain or snow that could infiltrate from the outside and the tubs keep the books extra protected. After nine days of quarantine, the books are finally able to be picked up by patrons again.

Getting to this point of reopening took some adjusting for the staff of the Guilderland library. “When we first had to close the doors back in March,” says Lisa Pitkin, the head of Cataloging and Collection at Guilderland Public Library, “We were lost. My fellow co-workers and I just didn't know what was going to happen. Did we still have a job? Could we pay our rents? This building is more than just books, you know. People rely on it.”

The importance of what this community brings to the table is larger than most people acknowledge. The library is a space where groups can meet up on a scheduled basis and have structured socialization in their lives. Now, many of those socialization aspects have become virtual experiences for the public to continue partaking in. “I used to be in the knitting circle at the library,” says Tasha O’Harris, 86, who donates her knitting projects to St. Peter's hospital in Albany. “We would meet every Tuesday at noon and just knit. After I lost my husband, Rodney, I relied on those women to socialize with. They were my friends and I haven't seen them since March.”

O’Harris lives in Our Lady of Mercy Life Center, a nursing home right behind the Guilderland Public Library. Once a week, she would opt to be bussed to the library, instead of walking, to participate in the knitting circle. “You get sick of seeing the same faces every day at Mercy. I won't lie, I like my knitting friends better than my neighbors!” O’Harris has been living at Mercy for the past nine years. “I used to live in Albany but after Rodney's passing, I knew I had to go somewhere that would help me with daily needs.” O’Harris originally is from Ohio and moved to the Albany area when she was 23. “Rodney had family here and I did not have a good relationship with my parents so we got up and left. It was terrifying but I had him and that was

all that mattered.” Together they had a son, Tobias, and settled in a small house just outside of the city. O’Harris eventually got a job at a beauty salon and worked there until she was 52. “Oh, I miss cutting hair and dolling up the girls that came through!” Exclaimed O’Harris. “Prom season was always such a thrill, seeing all the pretty dresses and updos. These hands can barely hold my knitting needles now, let alone those tiny scissors!”

As the couple grew older, their list of friends and companions grew shorter and shorter. “It’s hard losing friends that you would always see each week for dinner. When Rodney died, I knew that I needed a community to join. I am a very social person and I need to be surrounded by people! This pandemic has been hard because I only ever see the same faces over and over again. I like to have fun! This pandemic has not been fun.” When O’harris moved to Our Lady of Mercy Life Center, she joined the knitting group there but quickly grew to dislike it. “We talked about the same things every time. The conversation would start with what we all had for breakfast and then move to what was for lunch. The most interesting things we would talk about would be grandbabies or if anyone got a visitor recently.”

O’Harris learned about the library's knitting group and decided to give it a try. “I like meeting new people so I thought it was going to be fun and I was right!” The group would meet in a small side room with windows that overlooked a small patch of grass right off of the parking lot.

“I wish I could say that Tasha was quiet at first but that would be a blatant lie,” says Kathleen Pica, 70, a resident of Guilderland and also a member of the same library knitting

group. “She wanted to know everything about us. I had only been a part of the group for about two months at the time but she really made me feel welcome.”

With the library shut down, O’Harris is unable to talk to her knitting friends. “I don’t really know how to use a phone. Tobias calls my room and I have his phone number written down somewhere, but that is about it. I use my email to shop with QVC and look at pictures that Toby sends me of my granddaughter, Samantha. She looks just like him but with better hair!”

With little knowledge around a computer and a preference to talk in person, O’Harris has lost contact with her knitting group. “I only talk to Kathleen because she asked me for my email during our last meeting. We haven’t exchanged many emails but it is nice to hear from her.” At the end of their last meeting, O’Harris did not expect that she would not see that group for more than a year. With the public library still closed to the public other than the book drop-off, O’Harris has no expected time of when she will see her friends again. “I just hope that they are all happy and healthy. We will see each other again one day, I am sure of it.”

Guilderland Public Library was established in 1957 by the Westbrook Women’s Club Library Committee as the Guilderland Free Library. The library started out small with 900 books and was able to have been housed in multiple spaces throughout town before putting any roots down. The first place in which these women set up the library was inside of the Guilderland Elementary School as a free library for the children. This was the first library in the area and it was getting many donations to expand the collection. The library was then moved to an old laundry building in 1959 that was next to a gas station. A rental system of 15 cents for books per

week was established so that the general public could enjoy the books and the committee could pay for the library's rent. After gaining a reputation and a collection of 2,000 books, the library moved out of the laundry building and into a space at the Westmere Shopping center. For nine years the library stayed at this location, gaining a circulation of 10,000 books and being open for 32 hour per week. After two more expansions and moves within 20 years, the library set down its final roots in 1992 in a brand-new building right off Route 20, this being the main traffic road in the area. Many other businesses are along this road with multiple shopping centers and malls stemming off of it. This library has had a community behind it ever since its conception and that still shows today.

“What I like most about my library is the books,” says Bryana Wachowicz, the teen librarian at Guilderland Public Library. “Just walking in the door and seeing so many books at my disposal puts me in awe. I think to myself, so many good books waiting to be read, and so many places to visit.” Wachowicz was a patron of many libraries when she was growing up in Troy, just a half hour from her home now in Guilderland. Her search for adventure within book pages took her to explore other libraries in her area and compare them to each other. At the age of 30, her love of books took over her professional life and she became a librarian. “My graduation date was actually the day after my birthday, so I like to say that I was born into the job.”

Wachowicz coordinates events for young adults, everything from book clubs for newly released titles to study groups coordinated with the Guilderland Public High School. “Due to COVID, we have had to become creative with our activities,” Wachowicz says. “A few weeks ago, we hosted a virtual Hamilton Trivia Night and it actually had a decent turnout so we are

going to try a few more of those events.” Anna Quinn, a junior at Guilderland Public High School, was a participant of this trivia night. “I used to go to the library for some of the study groups they had.” Quinn says. “It really helped me focus on my classwork and school in general. And I love Hamilton. When I saw that they were doing a Hamilton trivia night over Zoom I actually screamed at my phone!”

A digital events calendar is available on the library's website, offering events like the Hamilton trivia night and the popular “Computer Coach” event where Robin Smith teaches how to navigate new technologies or even build a resume. According to Smith, mostly older patrons sign up for this event. “Technology is hard,” Smith says with a chuckle, the Zoom audio popping along with their breaths. “I struggled with it but now I have a strong grip with it and want to help out folks who have no clue how to even turn on a laptop! I had this one older lady, the sweetest thing, who got an iPhone for Christmas and she was so clueless. She still emails me questions even though it's been a few months.”

Activities like curbside crafts and virtual seminars are being held for all members of the community, even if they have never been to the library before. On the library's event calendar, registration links and event information are readily available for all of their events. No library card is necessary to sign up and utilize these programs.

Due to the pandemic, access to the building is only available to the staff. “We were hit pretty hard, yeah,” says Wachowicz. “For a month after the lockdown, all of us librarians would send emails to each other seeing if anyone had new information about opening back up again. It was like living in an apocalypse.”

The Guilderland Public Library is the main public library for the 35,000 residents who live in the town. Libraries in significantly smaller towns are slowly opening back up to the public, following CDC guidelines, whereas the Guilderland Public Library is choosing to remain restricted. “It’s a tough decision but in the end we will all benefit from it,” says Phil Berardi, the library’s head of Access Services and Circulation. “Compared to smaller libraries, we get three to five times the number of patrons than they do. I would absolutely love to open the doors and let the community in but at this point in time, that is just not feasible for us to do.”

In March of 2020, public school districts all around the country equipped their students with laptops so that remote learning would still be available to finish out the school year. With no physical students to assist in the library, school librarians resorted to assisting the teachers in learning how to navigate the new technology needed to teach their students. “We were traversing a new terrain and it was really difficult,” says Yvonne Keller-Backer, the library media specialist at Duquesburg High School, located 20 minutes west of Albany. “Zoom was so new to us all and I had to take a few crash courses in how to work it. I was the go-to person for this technology that I had only known for about 20 minutes!” During this initial time, the role of a school librarian was pushed to the backburner.

Virtual office hours are in place for students to drop in if they have questions on a project they are working on or if they just want to chat about the news. In-class assistance is also being provided by school librarians when the teachers need their expertise on assignments such as

research papers and how to properly cite a website. Even though the students are not able to use the library as a physical resource, they still have the ability to get assistance from the librarian.

Donna Wilkes, the elementary school librarian at the Duanesburg Central School district elementary school, had a tough time getting through the first few months of the lockdown. “I kept in touch with teachers, seeing if they needed any help in their classes or book recommendations for their lesson plans, and really just communicated through email,” says Wilkes. “During the time we went remote till the end of the school year, I didn't see any students.” The school district became fully remote mid-March of 2020 and remained that way through the end of the school year.

For some students, it was difficult to participate in remote learning. “I live on a farm in the middle of nowhere, basically,” says Corrine Wright, a senior at Duanesburg High School. The town is located right off of a highway and is made up of horse and livestock farms, small mom-and-pop businesses, and trucker routes. The closest superstore is a half hour drive in any direction and the local YMCA was the hot spot until the pandemic forced its doors to close. “I barely get any internet at my house,” says Wright. “And now that my sister and brother are also using it for school means that we have horrible reception. I can't present anything over camera and when I try to talk, my audio is all messed up. I actually miss going to school now.”

In a pre-pandemic school system, the librarian would assist students in finding books they needed or wanted, teach workshops on how to properly research information for assignments, and be a support in classes that needed it. “I was really on a roll with my first graders and getting

them comfortable choosing books with fewer pictures and more words,” says Wilkes. “Now that some of the students are there every other day, we are picking up right where we left off.”

With the shift to hybrid learning, Wilkes was able to see most of her students once again. “Typically, I will stay in one classroom for the day and help with the lesson plan that the teacher had planned. Now, with social distancing and making sure everyone is safe, it definitely is tougher getting the kids engaged in materials. When they are at school, you know they are at least looking at the material. But when I'm staring at a screen of black boxes and name tags? I don't feel like I am teaching anything at all.”

Rebecca Pless, an English teacher at Duanesburg High School, utilizes Wilkes as much as she can. “Donna is an amazing resource even if the library is not fully open. She wants the best for her students and will go to such lengths to get them information. In her free time, she creates google classrooms for a specific topic that some students are interested in and collaborates with them throughout the process. She is also a great resource for me!” Pless regularly emails Wilkes about future projects she wants to set up for her students and fun surprises. “They helped me create a fun animation project for the kids and I think they really liked it.”

Wilkes holds office hours on Zoom for students to drop in and ask questions. “I get maybe one or two students who will actually come to my office hours and that's all I could've asked for,” Wilkes says. “With how the world is right now, it is just a joy to see their faces and to make sure they are doing okay. It almost becomes a therapy for me to just chat with my students.”

When the 2021 school year started, many changes were made to insure the health and safety of the students. Schools either became fully remote, socially distant while in person, or a hybrid of the two. Librarians are still helping those who need technological advice and are there to provide assistance gathering information that someone is looking for. The main difference is how they get their job done. “It’s weird,” says Nancy Goldblatt, the head librarian at the Cobleskill-Richmondville High School. “I used to have to monitor kids and make sure they were being quiet, not sleeping between the stacks, or even watching Netflix on the school computers. Now I monitor Zoom calls and answer emails from teachers. It feels like a desk job and less like the fun job being a librarian is.”

Cobleskill-Richmondville High School is located in Schoharie County, New York, about 45 minutes west of Albany, New York. This rural town consists of one main street, a baseball field used for local Little League teams, and a creek that causes devastating flooding to the surrounding community. The high school is located just off of Main Street on top of a hill overlooking the creek. “The library is my favorite place in the school,” says Goldblatt. “Right smack in the middle of everything. It is really unique because it is circular and all of the windows allow the students to look in and see what activities are going on or just wave to their friends. Well, they used to be able to do that.”

With the pandemic hindering students' abilities to move around the school, the library gets little-to-no-use by the students who used to rely on it. “Mrs. Goldblatt would let me eat lunch in the library when I was cramming for a test or just needed a quiet place to relax,” says

Rami Kurosen, a sophomore at Cobleskill-Richmondville. “I would have to take care of my little sister when I got home after school so that my grandma could go to work. School was the only place I could focus on studying. I would always go to a desk near the history section so that I wouldn't get tempted to look at any of those books, history isn't really my jam.”

The school administrators at this school and many in the same area chose to keep students in the same classroom during the school day, placing the students in “pod” groups and having teachers move from room to room. “We still get free periods,” says Rami. “But everyone else is talking and making noise so it is hard to concentrate sometimes.” Students are permitted to exit the classroom to use the restroom and walk to the gym for physical education classes. They carry their backpacks with them into the classroom and place them in a small milk crate next to their assigned desk.

“It has been a tough year yeah, not gonna lie,” says Rami. “I mean, it sucked. I wish school was back to how it was before the pandemic.” Rami still emails Mrs. Goldblatt when he has any questions about his school work. “I wish I could help him like I used to,” says Goldblatt. “I made sure to keep the desk he sat at clear and clean everyday but now all I can do for him is give support through a computer screen. And you know what? I am still ecstatic to do that. Anything I can do to help my students I will do with a smile, that's just what the job calls for.”

Interview Log:

Anna Quinn, a junior at Guilderland Public High School, 11/02/2020, Zoom interview

Subject: Events at the Guilderland Public Library.

Contact: bluequinn2@gmail.com

Bryana Wachowicz, the “Teen Librarian” at the Guilderland Public Library, 09/13/2020, Email and Zoom interview

Subject: What it was like working throughout the beginning of the pandemic.

Contact: w.bryana@gmail.com

518.456.2400

Cathy Parotie, a book collector volunteer at the Guilderland Public Library, 10/22/2020, in-person interview

Subject: The book quarantine process and how the book drop-off program runs.

Contact: cathy.jane8@yahoo.com

Corrine Wright, a senior at Duanesburg High School, 02/07/2021, Zoom interview

Subject: Being a student at a public school during a pandemic.

Contact: corrine.wright@dcsed.org

Donna Wilkes, the school librarian at the Duaneburg Central School district, 08/12/2020,
10/03/2020, 02/11/2021, email and Zoom interview

Subject: Being a school librarian during a pandemic and how she still connects with students.

Contact: dwilkes@duaneburg.org

518.895.2279

Joanne Fralick, a librarian at the Sharon Springs Public Library, 11/09/2021, in-person interview

Subject: How the process of the Sharon Springs Library shutting down and reopening in a
pandemic affected the surrounding community.

Contact: cartofjoanne@gmail.com

518.284.3126

Kathleen Pica, a member of the same library knitting group as Tasha O'Harris, 03/05/2021,
email interview

Subject: Her friendship with Tasha O'Harris and their mutual knitting group.

Contact: picamkathleen@gmail.com

Lisa Pitkin, the head of Cataloging and Collection at Guilderland Public Library, 09/19/2020,
email interview

Subject: How the lockdown made her and her fellow librarians feel at the beginning of the
pandemic.

p.lisa@gmail.com

518.456.2400

Nancy Goldblatt, the head librarian at the Cobleskill-Richmondville High School, 10/27/2020

and 02/20/2021, Zoom and email interview

Subject: What is it like being a school librarian working in the pandemic and how her relationships with students has been affected.

Contact: goldblattn@crcls.org

518.234.3565

Phil Berardi, the library's head of Access Services and Circulation, 09/20/2020, email interview

Subject: Compared to other libraries, why does the Guilderland Public Library remain closed to the public other than the book drop-off program.

b.phil@gmail.com

518.456.2400

Rami Kurosen, a sophomore at Cobleskill-Richmondville, 02/18/2021, Zoom interview

Subject: How the library being closed has affected him and his school work.

r.kurosen@crcls.org

Rebecca Pless, an English teacher at Duanesburg High School, 11/23/2020, Zoom interview

Subject: How she utilized her school librarians still.

Contact: rpless@duanesburg.org

518.895.2279

Robin Smith, volunteer at Guilderland Public Library, 11/12/2021, Zoom interview

Subject: Their role at the library and what events they host.

Contact: technosmith@gmail.com

Tasha O'Harris, a senior citizen who lives at Our Lady of Mercy Life Center nursing home,
03/01/2021 and 03/12/2021, phone and Zoom interview

Subject: Her life and how the library was a social outlet for her.

Contact: rodney.tasha2@gmail.com

518.464.8100

Yvonne Keller-Backer, the library media specialist at Duaneburg High School, 09/04/2020,
email interview

Subject: What it is like being a school librarian working throughout the pandemic.

Contact: ykellerbacker@duaneburg.org

518.895.2279

Helen Thomas, the director of the Sharon Springs library, 11/16/2021, in-person interview

Subject: What virtual events the library attempted to host and how earlier community outreach
programs were not as successful as hoped.

Contact: helen0thomas@gmail.com

518.284.3126