

I Love My Librarian!

2011 Award

NOMINATION FOR

Michelle Luhtala

Library Department Chair
New Canaan High School Library
New Canaan, Connecticut

NOMINATED BY

Michael DeMattia
New Canaan, Connecticut

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets him/her apart?

Michelle Luhtala is dedicated to proactively promoting the integration of technologies into school curriculums for a more cohesive and comprehensive learning experience for students in a modern day and age. Her understanding and dedication to student learning styles is unparalleled, coupled with her technological expertise as an early adopter of new advances truly help to include a variety of resources and formats of information, allowing students to build a more holistic view of each and every topic of study.

2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?

I came to New Canaan High School as a freshman in the fall of 2008, having been in the New Canaan Public School system for many years, assumed to find similar resources and approaches to school projects and research papers. However to my great surprise, I found that Ms. Luhtala, and the entire New Canaan High School library staff, was spearheading a new movement to utilize the ever expanding pool of digital resources. Facebook, once the taboo figurehead of social media, had become a tool that, thanks to the promotion by the media staff, was being embraced by students and staff alike. On top of that, the time that students were spending on social media sites was slowly but surely shifting to more productive uses and the response from classes was truly remarkable! Group collaboration, teacher interaction, and grade wide communications has become an important part of our learning experience undoubtedly for the better. From a student's perspective, one of the hardest parts of teaching is creating a relationship between students and

teachers that fosters both trust and initiative. The inclusion of current technology, of which the student body has such a wealth of knowledge and appreciation for already, earned faculty major brownie points...in large part due to the “full court press” initiated by Ms. Luhtala.

One of the first things that struck me when I met Ms. Luhtala my freshman year was her level of organization and excitement for each and every project a class would do. I soon learned that her familiarity and dedication to each and every assignment remained unwavering regardless of the subject matter or class size. Her knowledge down to the minute details was truly impressive, and very often I found myself being directed to a certain source long before even I knew what it was I needed. She has become a vital link to teachers across all disciplines, a fact which is apparent even to students such as myself.

Furthermore, there has never been an opportunity to integrate new resources into a project that she hasn't jumped at the opportunity for. Her arms-open attitude towards change in this rapidly advancing era has earned her a great reputation with so many of us around school and the community.

Even as I write this application, a brief snapshot of my social media pages alone truly speak to what Ms. Luhtala has done with the school's culture and approach to 21st century learning. I am part of a Facebook group for the Class of 2012, where each and every senior has the ability to post new updates whether its regarding homecoming, spirit days, etc. The library has posted on their page a tutorial link regarding log-in help to their Google Apps accounts. My Spanish teacher has just posted on a group she recently created with the revised homework that more likely than not we would not have gotten otherwise. The Guidance Department has created a page for their college and career center which features a sudden change in the college visiting schedule, and the Office of Emergency Management has posted the latest info on Hurricane Irene. None of this would be possible if not for Ms. Luhtala's true initiative and dedication.

She is a true innovator, an impressive teacher, talented organizer, proactive researcher, and even a bit of a tech geek. Her influence has made her a driving force on so many important issues surrounding quality education and the improvements in even the brief amount of time I have spent here will no doubt be felt for years to come.

3. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.

Ms. Luhtala has earned recognition for herself, the entire library, as well as the school and the district. Her awards include earning national recognition by winning the American Association of School Librarian's prestigious National School Library Program of the Year (NSLPY) Award and Michelle was named Connecticut Library Association's (CLA) Outstanding Librarian. In the past two years, there have been other honors. CoSN, ISTE, and Gale/Cengage have recognized Michelle for collaborations with faculty. And she was one of four winners in Gale/Cengage's Are You A Librarian Superhero contest.

These days, there are usually well over 130 students in the library during any given class period. The library itself, thanks to Ms. Luhtala's vision, (having worked with the architect responsible for a complete library upgrade from 2002 to 2007), can simultaneously accommodate up to four classes at one time along with other students who between classes wish to catch up on work or study. Thanks to mobile SmartBoards and projectors, library "classrooms" are flexible - they can meet wherever their curricular objectives are best met – For example, history classes can meet in the 900s, and science classes in the 500s. There are designated sections for silent study, which are universally respected by students. The library is truly a destination for active and engaged learning.

But the library is not just a physical space. thanks to all these incredible advances, Michelle developed an award-winning website in 2005, and in 2008, she developed a hybrid online/in-real-life program delivery model, providing research support to students 24/7, from anywhere. THE ANNEX@ New Canaan High School Library, (the online instructional portal) features hundreds of lessons for curricular projects that come through the library during the course of the school year. It includes instructional video, screenshots, audio files, narrative guidelines, tips on keyword searching, links to websites Michelle created, and meticulously selected project resource lists. She maintains a YouTube channel for instruction, a Twitter page for tech support updates which both teachers and students check regularly, and a Facebook page to document events and happenings in the library.

Michelle is very resourceful. Through fundraising, grant-writing, award-winning, and simple networking, she is able to supplement the library budget year after year. The impact is pervasive. In the past seven years, she has brought in young adult authors like Laurie Halse Anderson, Chris Crutcher, Alex Flinn, and M.T. Anderson, and a number of non-fiction writers too – all funded through donations. Each event is exceptionally well organized and voluntarily well-attended. Her resourcefulness enriches the entire school. She recently secured a free three-year pilot subscription (worth \$48,000) to a higher education polling database that has amazing cross-curricular applications. The library circulates wireless computer-recording headsets for narrative presentations. They have also started circulating iPads, that were purchased with prize money from the 2010 awards. As a student who worked closely with the integration

But her contributions to the school do not stop in the library. She is currently faculty advisor to three New Canaan High School clubs – Teen Advisory Group, Library Chats, and the Graphic Novel Club, but over the years, she also advised Building with Books – a local chapter of a national organization that builds schools in developing countries, and the Mac Club – a learning exchange for Apple computing devotees. Ms. Luhtala also holds the record for the longest standing board member for the A Better Chance of New Canaan program – a scholarship program for disadvantaged youths. She was the selection chair for 22 scholars who came to live and attend the high school in New Canaan. She is also a trainer for the ACLU's Names Can Hurt program, and she coordinates school-wide events like Veteran's Day, Memorial Day, and Black History Month programs. If the Model UN team, or any teacher, really needs a chaperone for an out-of-town conference, they ask Ms. Luhtala. Michelle can also be found in the stands on Friday night football game, in the audience at a Friday night NCHS Theatre production, or planting on a Saturday morning to create a memorial garden for a deceased New Canaan Public Schools secretary.

Last year, she encouraged seven students to collaborate on a music video project and submit it to the American Library Association's (ALA) Why I Need My Library teen video contest. They wrote lyrics, composed music, performed, taped and edited the project, and they won! The video was featured at the ALA opening session before an audience of nearly 20,000 people. It is viewable at <http://bit.ly/NeedLibrary>

4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?

Ms. Luhtala raises the bar on student literacy programming across the curriculum and throughout the New Canaan community. She encourages English, science, and social studies teachers to assign independent reading to their students, thereby ensuring that all students at the high school have rich and varied reading experiences. She partners with the town library, the town teen center, and New Canaan Youth services to develop innovative and interactive teen reading programs. Since 2003, she has served as faculty advisor to the Teen Advisory Group – a club of New Canaan High School students who organize reading events, and advise the library on summer reading selections, library policy, and acquisitions. In 2008, she launched an innovative online book discussion forum, using freeware VoiceThread. Students used the forum to select and review books. When its novelty wore off, she replaced that online venue with another one to sustain student engagement.

Ms. Luhtala also helps her colleagues with the new federal mandate for Response to Intervention (RTI) – which, in turn, helps improve NCHS student performance. She developed two “assured experience” pre and post assessments. All freshmen participate in a My Personal Wellness project during the first semester of the 9th

grade year. It acts as an effective introduction to the library and its resources while also integrating subject matter from a variety of disciplines. Last year, Michelle administered a twenty-question pre assessment to the group, and then followed up with the same assessment after four research lessons. From the results, she was able to ascertain overall growth for 330 students, (a task not easily feasible in any school) but more importantly compare the before and after scores for each student on each question – determining which specific student needed intervention in which specific category. To achieve this, Ms. Luhtala used online quizzes administered through Moodle, the library’s online course management system. With the juniors, who are all required to do two research projects in the 11th grade, she developed a research action plan, asking students to articulate how they were going to meet the project requirements. Many of the questions asked students to self-assess their skills, but other questions helped teachers and librarians look for “red flags.” They were then able to prioritize from among 300 students those who need the most support, and intervene accordingly.

Our district rolled out Google Apps in the fall of my sophomore year in 2009. Ms. Luhtala was instrumental in supporting students (and faculty) in adopting Google Apps to enhance productivity. She created online tutorials, posted them to the library website, embedded Google Docs with instructions on how to copy, rename, share and save (CRiSS) into appropriate Moodle (online course management system) blocks for specific projects, and provided assistance to teachers who wanted to use this collaborative technology, but were hesitant about embarking on something they had not yet mastered themselves. Her use of Google Forms not only helped her assess student learning, but it also inspired them to use the technology for their own purposes in core content learning courses.

She is accessible, not only to her colleagues, but to students. For one thing, even though she has an office, she moved her workstation to the middle of the library. She is constantly surrounded by students, at their disposal, ready to answer their questions, or at least direct them to someone who can. The high school library website has three different ways to email her personally – and believe me we most certainly do! She also builds a “research & bibliographies” discussion thread into each project block in the online course management system, Moodle. Students can “Post your questions about research and bibliographies here. They will shoot straight into the posting librarian’s email. We will respond within 24 hours, Monday through Thursday, and within 72 hours on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday (vacations excepted).”

Yet the most impressive aspect to Michelle Luhtala is that after everything she has done for her students and colleagues, the time and energy dedicated to project after project, she has never lost sight of the world in which her students will live and work. While none of us can really visualize the future, the Partnership 21st Century Learning (P21) frameworks skill set is always front and center in Michelle’s curricular planning, her technology integration, and her focus on NCHS students’ social and emotional development. She encourages students to apply the same participatory and collaborative practices they employ in their extra-curricular life

(facebook, etc.) to their academic work. It is, admittedly, a challenge but she doggedly perseveres, always looking for the right tool to get students to that tipping point – the one that will make school a true community of participatory learning.

There is a pile of evidence to demonstrate Michelle's impact on student learning. In the interest of time, I will highlight just two impressive statistics. As of March 2010, fiction circulation at New Canaan High School Library increased by 267% since 2007, and 1,287% since 2001 (Statistics which I admittedly had to request from the librarians themselves). Student database usage steadily increases year after year - a fact not surprising to any of us with the constant improvements and refinements being made to the vast array of databases. Since 2001, the number of annual databases searches has increased 37 times. Last year's average number of 826,842 searches was up from 21,770 in 2001.

5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?

Michelle serves on the New Canaan Public Schools' Curriculum Leadership Council, Teacher Evaluation Committee, and Technology Council – this is the trifecta of elite district leadership. She is not there by accident. District level administrators value her perspective and input just as much as the newest of newbie teachers. She presents workshops on professional development days. She facilitates a module of the annual New Teacher Orientation. The district hires her to develop interdisciplinary curriculum during the summer. She has served on numerous curriculum and evaluation committees over the years. She is Tri-State trained, a certified mentor in Connecticut. She serves on the State Digital Library Advisory Board, its database subcommittee, and she co-chairs CoSN's awards committee. Last April, she was elected to the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) board.

Not only does Michelle present at conferences across the country, but she facilitates numerous professional development workshops right at the high school for the faculty. She will do this on demand, as needed, but also as part of larger professional development initiatives. She facilitates an online professional learning community for teacher librarians at edWeb.net called Using Emerging Technology to Improve Your School Library Program, where she presents monthly webinars designed to help librarians innovate their programs. The community grew from 200 to 2,500 members in the fourteen months following its inception.

Ms. Luhtala's partnership with the town's public library is an exemplar. In 2005, Michelle added the town library to the "interoffice" mail route to improve resource exchange. In 2008, she added all the town reference librarians to the school library's online course management network, and for each of the 200 projects, she posts a forum where reference librarians and students can interact. For six years, Michelle has physically sent as many as 350 summer reading books to the town library for the summer months, so they can circulate there while the school library is

closed. The 2011 summer reading program was designed in collaboration with the public library, and facilitated online.

She is a fierce advocate for intellectual freedom. This year, she launched a conversation about Internet censorship in K-12 education that prompted the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) to designate September 28, 2011 as Banned Websites Awareness Day. Towards this effort, Michelle created an informational website, BannedSites.info, about the event, and secured weekly guest posts from a wide-range of contributors for the AASL blog. The initiative received national press coverage when USA TODAY featured the story on its front page in July, 2011.

In 2008, when the state of Connecticut “upgraded” its Internet filter system to essentially block all social networking sites from schools at the state level, Michelle was one of five educators to testify before the Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology requesting that filter administration be restored to the local districts. They did - within the month.

There is one more way in which Michelle demonstrates leadership. This one is a little more intangible. Ms. Luhtala will honestly tell folks that she did not graduate with her high school senior class. As the story goes, she was a truant, and headed for trouble as an eighteen-year-old. She failed United States History and she had to attend summer school after her senior year before obtaining her high school diploma. She was not accepted to any of the three colleges she applied to. Eventually, after several years of working, and a couple of years in fashion school, Michelle found her way to New York University and devoted herself to teaching history (ironic, no?). Much later (2001), she became a school librarian. Here is where the leadership piece comes in. Every Monday afternoon, Michelle teaches in the New Canaan Public Schools’ alternative education program. There, she leads by example. She always tells her students the truth – that had the program existed in her high school; she would have been in it. It wasn’t, she failed, but then she rallied to succeed later on. I think many of us find hope in that.

I hope I have adequately conveyed my conviction that Michelle deserves this award, and that you share it. I can’t imagine a more worthy candidate but, for the sake of students and teachers everywhere, I hope that there are many school librarians who demonstrate similar dedication and expertise. What a wonderful world that would be!