

# I Love My Librarian!

2010 Award

## **Nomination for Christina Wagner**

Goodman South Madison Branch Library  
Madison, Wisconsin

### **Nominator:**

Emily Auerbach  
Madison, Wisconsin

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

As head librarian, Chris Wagner has brought joy, hope, and dignity to the South Madison branch of the public library, serving many low-income families from diverse backgrounds. In addition to bringing to her library numerous grant-sponsored author events, provocative panel discussions, bilingual computer classes, and creative educational programs for children, she helped sponsor the UW Odyssey Project ([www.odyssey.wisc.edu](http://www.odyssey.wisc.edu)), a free, life-changing college humanities course for adults at the poverty level, and Community Writing Assistance, a program in which South Madison Library patrons seeking help with letters to parole officers or memoir writing receive assistance from UW teaching assistants.

### **2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and made your experience of the library a positive one. For instance, did the nominee inspire in you a love for literature; assist you in a project or finding other information?**

"Chris Wagner made me feel welcome in the library and helped steer me toward a free college class." "If I hadn't found the pamphlet for the Odyssey Project in the library, I would never have gone back to college and gotten out of poverty." "Chris gave my children a second chance to check out books and helped our family read more." Those are but a few of the comments of the low-income adults in the Odyssey Project I direct in Madison. I am writing on behalf of the 200 graduates of the Odyssey Project who know that Chris Wagner is an absolute treasure in the community. She has helped so many men, women, and children view libraries in a positive way and obtain resources they needed. Here is a list of some of the kinds of help she has provided:

- creates summer teen programs to encourage both reading and volunteer work
- develops and leads English Language Conversation Circle for new speakers of English and started a Spanish-speaking volunteers group to help Spanish-speakers use the library
- develops and teaches small computer classes (Word, Internet, email, database searching) for low-income adults intimidated by technology
- creates attractive displays on everything from Black History Month to health programs

- works with the neighboring Health Center to plan Healthy Baby Fairs, AIDS prevention programs, and other health events
- leads book discussion groups and brings in celebrity authors
- works with prisoners let out on Huber Release
- implemented a Second Chance program to enable low-income children with library fines to start checking out books again
- obtains grants to hold panel discussions on topics ranging from voter apathy to the Innocence Project
- sponsors Community Writing Assistance, Memoir Writing, and other writing workshops at the library
- on a daily basis helps to steer library patrons of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, and income levels to print and electronic materials they need

**3. How has the librarian made a difference in the community? Please be specific.**

Christina Wagner has made a profound impact on the community. South Madison has half the income of the rest of the city. It serves many African American, Hispanic, and Asian American families, over a third of whom live at or below the poverty level.

At the time Chris began at the library, few people used the library and the facility seemed depressing. Within a matter of a few years, Chris had found a way to form partnerships with area schools and health clinics, bringing new life into the library and boosting use dramatically. She spearheaded a Second Chance program to allow low-income children who had fines to begin to check out books again. Now the South Madison library is a cultural hub of the community!

On a daily basis, Chris is a quiet but kind personality who adds warmth and dignity to the South Madison library. She sees to it that every person who enters the library leaves feeling better and with new resources. She has been a tireless activist for social justice by seeing to it that the library hosts programs helping low-income adults get an education. For the last eight years, for instance, the library has sponsored the UW Odyssey Project, an award-winning free college humanities course for adults near the poverty level. Through exposure to great works of literature, history, philosophy, and art, students who struggled with homelessness, incarceration, domestic abuse, teen pregnancy, and addiction get a new sense of power and find a voice. Students who learned about the Odyssey Project through Chris have gone from homelessness to UW-Madison degrees, from poverty to fulfillment as social workers, police officers, and nurses. The transformation is astonishing.

Another program Chris helped bring to the library is the Community Writing Assistance Program whereby UW teaching assistants in English offer free assistance to library patrons wishing to work on memoir writing, letters to parole officers, job applications, or school homework. This program benefits both the library patrons getting writing help and the teaching assistants becoming familiar with a more diverse audience than that on a traditional college campus.

Chris has received awards from her community such as the Friend of the Odyssey Project Award and an Advocacy Award from a local health organization, but she needs a NATIONAL award to recognize the extraordinary work she does in transforming a "low-income library" into an absolute treasure.

**4. How has the library, and the nominee, improved the quality of your life?**

For this response, I will be sharing the comments of my UW Odyssey students. Kegan Carter, a single mother of three, writes that "Had I not found an Odyssey pamphlet in the

South Madison library and seen the display about 'begin your journey to college for free,' I would still be working a menial job. This project enabled me to go from homelessness to a college degree, and now I am planning to apply to graduate school. Chris Wagner helped encourage me and helps my children want to read." Senior citizen Rockameem Bell, also an Odyssey student, says Chris epitomizes librarians at their best and that he would give her his "Jesus Walking" award for absolutely miraculous work. "Much love I've got for you, Chris!" he exclaims, "a love for your spirit, your soul, and your mind." In particular Rockameem wants to share his gratitude to Chris for her role in "putting up the space for me and for the Odyssey Project. Because of teh Odyssey Project, I have the power to know, to think, to write, to become so much more than I was because of this education" and a chance to "encounter Socrates, William Blake, Plato, Shakespeare, James Madison, Patrick Henry, Thoreau's Civil Disobedience, and so much more! I'm hooked on Socrates. I know Mr. Frederick Douglass. I'm coming out of my cave."

Another Odyssey student, Sherri Bester, shares Rockameem's use of hyperbole when describing Chris Wagner. Sherri is a mother of six who has overcome PTSD and mental illness; she now attends UW-Madison after graduating from the Odyssey Project. "Chris Wagner to me is a soft, warm, fluffy pillow where I have laid my head to rest, pray, and dream for 18 years!" Sherri exclaims. Sherri envisions Chris in the south Madison community as "an unbreakable steel bridge reaching into deep dark caves leading out into unlimited blue skies of freedom for ALL!"

Speaking personally now, I need to say that Chris Wagner has been an indispensable link to me in offering the Odyssey Project to the community. She is one of those gifted librarians who make doors open. By enabling us for the past eight years to hold our educational program at the library and by encouraging it in all sorts of ways, she has made it possible for hundreds of lives to be transformed. And the Odyssey Project is but one of the many programs she sponsors or runs. She is a true star who works quietly and humbly every day. I urge you to honor her with this award. She is a recent widow who has transcended her grief through helping others and serving her community. I am so honored to know Chris Wagner and to nominate her for this award.

##### **5. How does the nominee make the library a better place?**

Chris Wagner makes the South Madison library a better place both by her warm, encouraging, and kind presence and also by her tireless activism to bring in resources and sponsor programs that can change the lives of her low-income patrons. She makes the library a better place by seeing to it that those who don't speak English have resources in their language and resources to learn English. She makes the library a better place by seeing to it that children who have lost their right to check out books (and can't afford to pay the \$2 fine) can have a Second Chance to discover the joys of checking out books--and the responsibility to have that opportunity.

Chris Wagner makes the library a better place by using it to sponsor programs like the UW Odyssey Project. Of the Odyssey Project, Chris writes, "My late husband used to say that 'an adult educator is someone who knows how to arrange the chairs in a circle. . . that the best learning takes place when we sit face to face and learn from one another. That's the kind of learning happening in the Odyssey classes--the kind of learning that is EDUCATION.'" Chris has been an integral part of a program helping adults overcome adversity and achieve dreams through higher education.

Chris has made the library a better place by forming partnerships with all sorts of community groups. To encourage healthy eating, she even dressed as a carrot and read children's books! She helped bring a local farmer's market into the area and to sponsor

health programs encouraging better parenting, including programs helping adults to read to children at an early age. She brings in programs to the library to encourage more low-income adults to get help filling out tax returns or learning how to vote. She forms partnerships with groups holding career fairs or seeking ways to help prisoners start new lives when they are released into the community.

Chris Wagner has helped to change a low-income library that used to feel neglected and poor in quality to one of the most vibrant and culturally diverse places in the entire city.