

I Love My Librarian!

2010 Award

Nomination for Melissa McCollum

County of Los Angeles Public Library, Lawndale Library
Lawndale, California

Nominator:

Lillian Alldredge
Lawndale, California

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

Melissa is one of the most organized, efficient, dedicated and enthusiastic administrators we have ever known.

Her love of community, libraries, and reading is inspiring and her leadership and zeal for reaching out through innovative and timely programs is infectious. She is attuned to the people of Lawndale and takes swift action to provide excellent services, even with reduced resources, and her staff energetically follows her example. Love of community is evident in everything she does.

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?

Melissa gives strong support to the Friends of the Library by attending all of our meetings and supplying us with resources and updates on the goals of the library. Her communication with the members of the Friends of the Library group is superior and she is able to excite us to see things through her eyes. This ability inspires the Friends of the Library membership to support the library and its mission. She continually encourages input from our members and participation by our members in library events including those sponsored by the Los Angeles County Library.

In addition, Melissa is an important link between the library and the Friends of the Library Book Club. With her considerable knowledge of literature, she is able to suggest subjects of interest. She researches availability of books as well as participates in discussions encouraging members' opinions and ideas.

Also, Melissa has been a wonderful advocate for the services provided to the community by the Lawndale Library. She has enlisted the help of the Friends of the Library to help her achieve her dreams for enhanced library programs and services. For example,

Melissa had a strong desire to make the teens in the community into avid library users and to create a lifelong habit of using libraries and developing a love of reading which will be handed down from generation to generation. She searched for progressive ways to do this. When the California Council for the Humanities announced the "How I See It: My Place" program, Melissa jumped at the chance to obtain a grant for the Lawndale Library. The grant encouraged teens in 21 California libraries to explore photography and then write about their everyday environments in an innovative 10-week program. The aim of the program was to connect young people to their communities and give them skills in research, writing, photography, and exhibit planning and design. The teens planned and organized exhibits of their work at the library. At the opening of the new Lawndale Library, the teens were extremely proud of their photo display and could point with pride to their achievement (their work is also featured in an online version on the Council's website). For the community, having positive experiences for teens from their interactions with caring adults, helps to improve the quality of life for everyone involved.

The "How I See It: My Place" program was such a success for everyone involved, a Teen Friends of the Library group was formed and the teens continue to meet on a regular basis. They organized a talent show and made a movie and a public service announcement. (They also enthusiastically help at Friends of the Library fund raising events.) As a result of this, Melissa was invited to make a presentation at the California Library Association conference.

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

Pride in community is the hallmark of Melissa's activities. She reaches out and is inclusive in her efforts. Melissa is constantly on the lookout for programs to promote family togetherness. She introduces the community to new cultural experiences held at the library. She is interested in making all aspects of the library available to the many cultures represented within the City of Lawndale. Further, under her leadership, the library offers technical resources and staff support especially with computers for use by all ages and levels of competency. She has supported and developed programs to encourage reading by the very young all the way through adults.

Recently, the Lawndale Library moved from a tiny, tired 3,500 square foot facility to a beautiful new building of 17,300 square feet. The change was both physical and psychological. The logistics of moving to the larger library were daunting by any measure, but Melissa took it all with a positive attitude and excitement that ensured that the library opened to great acclaim and joy from the community. She had virtually no time to adjust to "thinking big" and yet she managed to do just that. She oversaw the selection of new materials and furniture and she participated in hiring many new staff. She pulled it all together and created a team even while people were trying to get used to the significant changes. She forged excellent relationships with all the people involved so that on opening day (and beyond) the library felt like it had been in operation for a very long time. People now walk into the facility and feel welcome. This is especially true of the youngest patrons. A beautiful new Family Place encourages parents, caregivers and young children to enjoy all that the library has to offer. Again, Melissa has led the way in ensuring this success. A dedicated Teen area has proved to be extremely popular and a source of encouragement and socialization for the young people of the community. A Homework Center and dedicated children's spaces are extremely appealing and bring in ever-growing numbers of people, some who have never used a library before. Reaching out to the community again, she sought and received funding from the local Sandpiper Junior Philanthropy Club to extend the library's "Children's

Birthday Book Club” to include teens as well. Now, any library patron age 18 and under can visit the library on their birthday and receive a free book.

Another of Melissa’s recent accomplishments on behalf of the community is establishing a community garden adjacent to the Lawndale Library. First, she obtained a significant Best Buy Grant to work with teens to create a garden. Next, she worked with the city of Lawndale, Los Angeles County and various community based organizations to develop a plan for an Ocean Friendly Community Garden and then get it approved. She also recruited teens and other volunteers to implement the idea. Part of this process included hosting a four-week workshop on becoming a certified victory gardener. This program was open to all library patrons. Finally, over many weeks, the garden was installed with the help of a large number of volunteers and various community sponsors. None of this could have happened without Melissa’s dedication and hard work.

We are all aware of the health problems associated with poor eating habits, especially when formed early in life. Melissa initiated partnerships with two local organizations, Growing Great and Network for a Healthy California. As a result, the library implemented a program dedicated to assisting kids, teens and adults to adopt healthy eating habits with nutritional education activities. When this program meets, they often use produce grown right next door in the Community Garden. Also, she has enthusiastically embraced and acted upon the County’s directive to provide healthy refreshments at meetings and programs.

Further, her relationships that grew out of the community garden project allowed the library to partner with the West Basin Municipal Water District to encourage local citizens to reduce their water use outdoors by providing them free landscape water audits and free irrigation controllers. Through rebates from this project, the Friends of the Library and Teen Friends of the Library were able to raise money for the library.

Not only does Melissa promote activities helpful to the community, she develops programs that are fun! Recently, she implemented a youth orchestra at the library to give elementary school children an opportunity to learn the violin. And, she once again organized the Annual Lawndale Library Fiesta with live performers and free refreshments. Over 300 Lawndale citizens participated this year.

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

Melissa regularly attends our Friends of the Library meetings and has helped make them interesting and informative. She is consistently aware of grant opportunities to assist the Friends of the Library with funding programs that benefit the library and the community. She has improved the quality of life not only for our group, but we also see her improve the quality of life in the community through the library’s mission and its activities. By Melissa’s tireless efforts, people are drawn to the library and its services. Especially, for children and their families, she has created an environment that encourages use of the library and its offerings, therefore improving people’s lives by supporting education, relaxation and technology needs.

In addition to improving our experience as members of the Friends of the Library, Melissa has touched each of our lives in unique ways. Here is what some of our members have to say:

“As a former long time employee of the Lawndale Library, I am especially delighted with the beautiful new library. Melissa has done much to make it a welcoming place for all citizens of Lawndale. She has started some interesting programs and increased the number of volunteers who are well trained and very important to the library.”

“Melissa is so helpful and articulate. For example, I was asked to speak on behalf of the Friends of the library. I didn’t mind speaking in front of others, but was having a hard time putting into words what they wanted me to speak about. Melissa came to my rescue and helped me write the speech.”

“Melissa’s patience, warmth and helpfulness when I am looking for a book have made me feel secure in her knowledge of books. She has made the library a welcoming, safe and happy place.”

“ She always makes me feel comfortable.”

“When I started volunteering at the library, Melissa would often stop by where I was working to not only thank me for volunteering, but to share news with me which made me feel a valued member of the library team.”

“Melissa has initiated many wonderful programs in the library. Further, as treasurer of the Friends of the Library, I am thankful for her support of our club. In addition to letting us know how we can be of most value to the library, she goes over and beyond to help us receive grants for the library.”

“I enjoy the library very much. It has increased my desire to read and improved my English language skills. Melissa is a big part of this.”

“Melissa has the rare gift of being able to focus on the individual and respond to ideas and suggestions no matter how busy she is.”

“She knows that in this community there are many people new to the United States who did not grow up with the privilege of free and accessible libraries. Her outreach is inclusive and she strives to make the library an attractive and welcoming environment that meets the needs and wishes of the community.”

“As for my volunteering in the library, Melissa is a joy to work with. She has helped me enjoy my time in the library working and shelving, etc. and I can definitely take away with me her great patience and knowledge with customers. I look forward each week to volunteering in such a pleasant atmosphere. Kudos to Melissa and she most certainly deserves this award.”

Note: This nomination is made on behalf of the members of the Friends of the Lawndale Library who are also patrons of the library. Members are: Lillian Alldredge, Rita Baisley, Carol Castelletto, Nickie Devine, Treva Henderson, Anita Holmquist, Karen Kane, Jean Mangiameli, Frances Ondell, Florence Rooney, Frances Sakata, Ruth Tanner, Angelina Varga, Marion West and Donna Wilkes.

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

While California’s gloomy economy has had a very unfortunate impact on direct services to the public, Melissa has succeeded in providing a joyful and innovative library

experience by making the best use of available resources. When the new Lawndale Library was in the planning stages, the projected number of staff was appropriate for a large building. By the time the new library opened, there was a necessary reduction in the number of staff. To meet customer demand and not let the reduction become apparent, she consulted with administrators and others for best practices and then she brainstormed with her local staff to come up with solutions. For example, she implemented a “roving staff” system. Staff is encouraged to work on several levels and to be responsible for physical areas of the building, moving rather than being more stationary, and always alert to customer needs while keeping the facility in excellent order. She also realized that the greater size of the building would need improved communication to keep things running smoothly. She creatively implemented an online version of a “morning report” utilizing technology to improve work flow and thus customer service and satisfaction.

Another use of technology that makes the library a better place is her efforts with the city to “double up” on promotion of library programs and services. The city owns and operates a very large, colorful electronic sign that can be seen from the 405 freeway (one of the busiest and well traveled roads in the country). The city enjoys revenue from advertisers. Melissa saw this and immediately thought about how it could be used to promote library services. She worked very diligently to convince the city to allow library messages free of charge. Not only does the prominent sign carry library messages, she has forged yet another wonderful partnership for the benefit of the library and its customers.

Most importantly, Melissa’s warmth, caring and patience has had a very positive influence on the morale of the library staff and on the welcoming atmosphere the library patrons enjoy. It is an efficiently run operation and physically has a very pleasant atmosphere in which to work, study and enjoy. Attendance has skyrocketed. The attendance figure for the period March 2009 through August 2010 comes to 262,413 visitors to the Lawndale Library.