



I Love My
Librarian!
2013 Award

Nominations for: Julia E. Allegrini

Branch Manager

Covington Branch of the Kenton County Public Library
Covington, Ky.

Nominator: Alma Puissegur

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award.

What sets him/her apart?

Julia Allegrini is a innovative, yet pragmatic, visionary. She envisions the Covington Branch of the Kenton County Public Library as a central and major community resource for information , learning , and engagement of, our entire Covington community and she has shaped our branch's services accordingly. Because of her commitment and her vision, she effectively balances the needs of patrons, staff, and community. During the current 21/2 year renovation of our branch, she has used the renovation as a tool for community involvement and has kept our library open seven days a week, maintained access to all resources, and engaged the community even more than before in supporting patrons and staff.

2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and made your experience of the library a positive one.

Julia has helped me by keeping our library open during the entire renovation project. This is an astounding accomplishment because of the scale of the renovation. The only original remnant of the interior that I can see is a back stairwell! The building renovation began more than 2 years ago and will be completed in the next two months. As each phase is completed, departments must be moved to new locations. Despite the Herculean difficulties inherent in such an undertaking, Julia has assured that the branch has remained open to the public 7 days a week throughout the renovations. She has engaged both patrons and staff to create options on how to keep our library functional during this time and held several well-attended community meetings.

Julia makes our library a safe and welcoming place in which for me to read and to relax. The variety and sophistication of branch staff attests to her commitment to reflect and to respect the diversity of the branch's urban/suburban service area. When I and my neighbors see ourselves reflected in the staff, our library experience is more welcoming and harmonious for all of us.

Although the Covington staff are diverse, they share commonalities in their public service. They are intelligent people who are courteous toward patrons and toward each other. The staff are cheerful and patient and willingly offer service, information, and advice to the wide variety of people who use the our library on a daily basis. Julia's leadership sets the tone for the 60-person staff.

I visit our library as a patron at least weekly. I always feel both welcomed and safe there. I frequently see Julia walking around in the public spaces, filling in at a variety of tasks to keep services flowing, or just welcoming patrons. She directly and indirectly makes my experience a positive one. Because of my positive experiences with Julia and the staff of the Covington branch, I have become a volunteer for our library, helping to keep the children's easy reader books in order.

My experience as a patron is not unique. “Julia has a special talent for working with diverse groups. It is always her objective to meet the needs of as many patrons as possible and to make all members of our community feel welcomed and respected in our library.” Dave Schroeder, Director, Kenton County Public Library. Her commitment to ensuring a quality experience for all patrons is appreciated by those she supervises. “In every aspect of her library career, Julia has worked tirelessly to ensure that patrons of all abilities and experiences have equal access to both the physical library and its services. Julia has worked to expand the Library’s Homebound program, which serves patrons who are not able to visit the building. Julia’s commitment to serving all patrons was also evident during her time as supervisor of the Library’s Talking Books service, which provided books on tape and tape players to patrons with vision and physical challenges, making it difficult to access print materials.” Elaine Kuhn – History/Genealogy Head Librarian

Sheila Gray, another regular patron at our branch, expresses Julia's impact this way: “My family has visited our library weekly since my oldest boy was a baby. Now that he is in high school, he is a weekly library volunteer. We are blessed to have many great libraries in this area, but we choose to go to Julia's branch because of the welcoming and diverse culture. The downtown branch caters to people of diverse educational, socio-economic, and age backgrounds. The programming, staff, and collection cater to the needs of all those populations in ways that keep my family coming back each week. From my regular interactions with Julia, I know that she is a big part of why our library appeals to so many people. Regardless of what she has going on or how busy she is, she always takes the time to find out how my family and I are doing and to direct us to other ways that we can access library resources. We love our library, and we love our librarian, Julia Allegrini.”

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

Julia's commitment to her vision and values impacts our community in many ways. “Julia does not view our library in isolation. She encourages her staff to reach out to agencies, educational groups and others to strengthen the community and to provide equal access to information for everyone. Julia, through outreach activities, looks beyond the walls of our library to find opportunities to serve our patrons. As a manager, Julia always considers the needs of the patron as the primary factor when making decisions.” Dave Schroeder, Director, Kenton County Public Library

Our library works closely with local schools, including preschools and schools serving students k-12, as well as local centers for adult learning. Under Julia's leadership, our library has partnered with Gateway Community College which was expanding its urban center located across the street from our library. Many of their students could not afford to purchase text books. Gateway agreed to purchase the textbooks and our library agreed to manage their lending, extending the loan period at checkout to encompass the college's semester schedule. Without this partnership, many students who were struggling financially could not have taken advantage of the learning opportunities Gateway provided.

Janice Wilkerson, Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services in the Covington district states: “The Covington Branch of the Kenton County Public Library provides outstanding services for our students and schools. The library tailors many services just for schools, including book collections for teachers, special visits for classrooms to our library, as well as a summer reading program at each of our elementary schools. Many of our students and families rely on our library for regular access to computers and the internet for everything from homework to job searches.”

Maria Parker, head of the Circulation Department notes “how much Julia works to make the Covington Branch a true part of the community and is always encouraging staff and others in the

community to find ways to make the library the center of the city.” She and her staff work tirelessly to bring the libraries resources to anywhere that is open to their participation. For example, at a Covington street fair aimed at bringing together motorcyclists and pedal cyclists, Julia brought library materials for loan and allowed local residents to obtain their library cards “on the spot” so they could check out materials. Julia and her staff also participate in Partners in Prevention, a coalition of community stakeholders working the goal of helping youth in Covington succeed in every aspect of their lives.

Julia recently sought clarification of a law governing to whom our library could donate materials/equipment that were no longer in use. Several non-profits and government agencies, struggling with budget issues during difficult economic times, have benefited, e.g., the Covington Fire Department was able to access unused chairs and tables, and the local public defenders office received chairs, tables, file cabinets, and art. John Delaney, supervising attorney for the Covington public defender's office says:“ The furniture and art work Julia facilitated the library donating has been very helpful in making the office more usable for both the attorneys and our clients. Prior to that donation, we did not have a table large enough to allow us to sit with a client and family members and review the evidence and discuss the case. The library additionally donated several large chairs and art work that are now in a common area. That has help to create a relaxed environment were the attorneys can gather and informally brainstorm cases and problems. The donated furniture and art work has also allowed us to create a more professional appearing client reception area. Prior to our library’s donation the furniture in the reception area was over twenty years old and was falling apart.”

Part of Julia's success in enhancing the quality of our community stems from her ability to innovate. For example, several large and old trees in our old parking lot had to be removed as part of the renovation project. Some of these trees were types specific to our area, such as the Kentucky Coffee trees. Rather than letting these trees that had beautified and shaded our community for decades just be cut down and ground to pulp, Julia contacted a local group of non-profit woodworkers who were delighted to reclaim the beautiful wood for use in their work. Through their art, the wood will continue to grace our community.

Because of Julia's vision, commitment, and extraordinarily diverse skills, our area is blessed with a vibrant library with a highly skilled staff, all of whom work to make the entire community a better place in which to live.

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

It has helped me personally and it has helped everyone else in the community. To be able to walk to my library, to read a magazine to which I do not subscribe, to sit in companionship with total strangers who are relaxed over books, newspapers, magazines or computers – this is one of the wonderful ways to be alive in the urban core. I am always comfortable when I speak with staff about my interests. They invariably suggest an intriguing book or website that I might like.

Julia's impact reaches far beyond me. “In her work as both a practicing librarian and manager, Julia demonstrates a very strong commitment to meeting the needs of every library user. She is focused on improving the quality of life for each individual in the community through library service tailored to meet their needs. Many people in Covington and the surrounding area have benefited from her compassionate approach to library service and life in general.” Wayne Onkst, state librarian and commissioner of the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives

Our community is composed of persons of various economic resources. Julia welcomes everyone to our library. For example, as is typical in many urban centers, the Covington area is home to several shelters to assist persons who are temporarily homeless. Julia established a policy that allows our staff to issue library cards to those living in shelters or halfway houses so that they may continue accessing resources despite the change of circumstances in their lives.

Julia has been tireless in her efforts to support her staff during the construction. Patti Richards, Head of Children's Services shared that "Julia often pays out of her own pocket for staff to enjoy pizza lunches or she will bring treats for everyone, just as a way of saying 'Thank you' to all, as we work through challenges brought on by the construction/renovation."

The project has been stressful. "Noise, dust, heat, and cold have been constant companions. The branch has lost heat, light, water, and power at one time or another. Through it all, however, Julia has solved problems and kept staff informed. Julia has been on site every step of the way. She skipped taking much deserved days off and rescheduled vacations many times in order to troubleshoot building issues. In a recent example, flash flooding in early July left a large portion of the library's lower level with up to 3-4 inches of water. Julia came in knowing the level of flooding elsewhere in the city and suspecting the library might be in jeopardy. During a storm, she stood in deep water and mud to fashion a temporary dam to divert water away from the branch's foundation. This single action on her part was a factor in our library not taking on any further water, which lessened the chance for any additional damage to the new Children's Department and staff work areas. As one staff member related to the Children's Department head "...he was in awe and deep respect for what he witnessed Julia doing that day to keep the library from additional flooding. He was truly proud of her!" John Graham, Head of Adult Services

Whoever you are, for whatever reason you are at the library, Julia reaches out to you.

"I have been working with Julia close to five years on the renovation and addition to the Covington Branch of the Kenton County Public Library and you really get to know a person, especially working on a complicated phased project. Julia has kept a level head during close to 30 months of construction, numerous construction delays and a recent flood to the lower level of the library. Julia cares deeply about her library, staff and customers and has been involved in the entire decision making process from programming all the way through construction. She is so passionate about serving her customers and providing a great environment for her staff.

One evening after a long day of design meetings we were setting up the library for a community meeting to share design ideas and get community input and somehow Julia and I started talking about our respective homes. I mentioned that I thought my home might be a Sears and Roebuck catalog house. Julia said that the library has an extensive collection of architecture books and she excused herself and came back with an armful of books about catalog homes. That was a touching gesture and just shows how much she cares about people. She had already had a full day of design meetings and she didn't need to do that for me and I will always remember it." Eric Lipschutz, Senior Interior Designer, Design Group

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

Julia is a beacon of tolerance and openness for the entire community. Covington is an old river city across from Cincinnati, Ohio and the urban core for a string of old, small cities which cling to the Northern edge of a conservative suburban community. Our library sits on the border of a business

and residential district. The area has happily seen an influx of younger people who seek the urban life. Covington and our library struggle with the effects of gross income inequalities, racial division, sexual orientation issues, and political extremes in the population. In such an environment, Julia's dedication to creating a public space open to all members of the community becomes an interesting and challenging concept to put into practice, but her creative commitment has made this concept a reality at our Covington library.

Patti Richards, Head of Children's Services describes Julia's role as "...a tremendous source of information, encouragement and support for me in my role as head of Children's Services, but also in promoting early childhood initiatives, writing grants to help us achieve a new vehicle to serve the early childhood community and understanding the vital importance of reaching and serving families who struggle with inter-generational illiteracy in an urban setting." Patti goes on to say that "Julia Allegrini is one of the most caring, sincere individuals I have ever had the privilege to know. She truly loves the library and our staff, the written word, and the people she serves every day, no matter who they are or where they come from...all are important to her. Julia is the epitome of service and dedication, especially to those who struggle with access issues, whether it be physical, auditory or visual impairment. She constantly challenges her branch staff to seek other perspectives and develop positive initiatives that seek to expand services and programming beyond the normal scope of what public libraries are perceived to be, but in the end could bring greater understanding as well as improve literacy for all ages."

Julia's direct friendliness naturally attracts partners to our library. She is always open to exploring new options in response to the needs of people in her area. For example, the county courthouses and related offices are in Covington and many attorneys have offices in the City, as well as the rest of the county. Julia initiated a three year experiment with the Kenton County Law Library to have the expensive West Law internet legal service available free to all library patrons in the county, not just attorneys. She accomplished this at almost no cost to our library.

The prolonged renovation of our branch has showcased Julia's extraordinary talents. When faced with reduced space due to renovations, Julia encouraged staff to take even more programs out to the community. Staff responded creatively to the challenge. They took book collections to the employees of the local IRS as it would be harder for their employees to access materials at our library. Since meeting space was non-existent during the first phases of the renovation project, two local coffee shops agreed to host book clubs. This allowed the coffee shops to potentially broaden their customer base, while providing out book clubs a place to continue to meet. When the branch parking lot was demolished during renovations, Julia encouraged her staff to find alternative parking for their large van that would have taken up several of the precious remaining parking spaces. As a result of staff's effort, two local businesses provided, for free, space for our library to park their van.

Here is a concrete example of her commitment to keep our library open during renovations: One day, our library's sewer line was inadvertently cut by construction workers. Instead of closing our library, Julia had her staff move their services outside the building. Staff retrieved books on hold while patrons waited outside. The Children's Department moved their scheduled program out to a patio area. Adult services sought reference questions from those waiting to enter, went in and researched the information, then brought their results back to the waiting patrons. Despite a broken sewer line, she made it work because Julia always makes it work- for the community, for her patrons, and for her staff.