

I Love My Librarian!

Award

Jennifer L. Newcome
Librarian
Northeastern High School
Manchester, Pennsylvania

Nominated by: Emily Knezic and Ann Dellinger

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

Though a librarian is an integral part to any school, Jen sets herself apart by supporting us not only in our curricular work, but by making connections with colleagues, students, and the community on a daily basis. Jen did not start her career at Northeastern, but in her sixteen years with the district, she has volunteered with a variety of clubs, attended countless school and community events, celebrated the successes of students and the school, hosted events and breakfasts to boost staff morale, welcomed new students with a friendly face, and built personal connections that last past graduation. Not many librarians go above and beyond their position in the way that Jen does. Sometimes her efforts are as big as hosting major events like a STEM workshop for all sophomores. And sometimes, her efforts are as simple as offering a cold bottle of water from her office fridge to a busy student. She always has Northeastern's best interest as her focus.

How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school?

As English teachers, the library has been our second home. We spend at least ¼ of our time holding class in the library. During this time, Jen is a co-teacher to our students. Students look to her for answers to research questions, of course, but they also respond to her as a regular education teacher when they have questions about course content. This co-teacher relationship that Jen creates with the teaching staff is a positive benefit to students as well. Additionally, Jen serves as a judge for some of our debates. She volunteered to do this after helping to teach the debate unit with us, and this position affords her the ability to learn along with our students, which is something for which Jen is best known. In addition to being a co-teaching partner, Jen has utilized the library budget, and her personal money, to fund one of our research projects. She is constantly on the search for student-friendly research materials about British history that our classes can utilize. Over the summer, it is not uncommon to get a text from Jen telling us that she picked up several copies of new texts that could be beneficial for our students. This additional research helps us so much and provides our students with readable non-fiction to assist them in their first research papers.

Jen is extremely welcoming. If we walk into the library and tell her we have a question, before she even hears it, her response is “yes!” In fact, her answer is always yes, and this welcoming vibe is also passed along to students. When asked about their relationship with Ms. Newcome, students told us that she welcomes them into the library, and they love having a great learning environment while they are there. The combination of a strictly learning-focused environment and a caring place to be with friends is unique to the NHS library, and Jen is responsible for that. Jen has also helped us as we embark on our graduate school journeys. She uses her strength in research to help us find information that we cannot find on our own. For example, she used our Wilkes University login to sit down with us to find case studies of how technology has impacted English Language Learners. She has also done this with students returning from college who are struggling with finding some specific piece of information. By engaging in the research process WITH students (and teachers) instead of FOR them, Jen has changed how we view research. She makes it more like a game that we work on together, and this has made it more fun and enjoyable.

Personally, Jen has had a dramatic impact on our lives. As new teachers, Jen took us under her wings and taught us about how to maintain appropriate relationships with students and teachers. She also taught us what being actively engaged in our jobs looks like. Each day between class periods, Jen stands in her doorway. She has a smile on her face constantly, and she says hello to all students as they pass. If students are misbehaving, Jen also is quick to tell them, kindly but firmly, that their behavior needs to change. Students know that Ms. Newcome will do this, so as teachers, it is helpful to us that Jen is so consistent. Because of her consistency with helping others, we know that she is the first person we go to if we are struggling. If we have a class and cannot quite figure out how we should assess a unit or how we can cut out a day of class if we unexpectedly miss that time, Jen is willing to brainstorm with us. Knowing that we always have a person with whom to brainstorm makes coming to school and teaching so much nicer daily. Jen will drop everything to be a good friend, and we appreciate that so much.

Jen has improved our quality of life because we know we have another person who is always on the same page as us. If we are in class and a student asks Ms. Newcome a question, she is sure to respond in a similar fashion to how we, ourselves, would respond. Again, Jen’s consistent nature is evident, and she is very aware of her role as a co-teacher, which means our students are happier because they have another adult to help them with their work. If Jen sees that we’re having a rough or hectic day, her first question is, “What can I do to help?” and she sincerely means it. She goes to great lengths to make our lives easier and that allows us to be better teachers.

How does the nominee make the school a better place?

Jen has completely reinvented the library since taking over in 2002. When Jen entered Northeastern, the library was not a place that classes went. It was a room that happened to house books that students went to when they did not want to sit in class. Since that time, the library has been transformed by Jen into an integral part of Northeastern. One way that Jen has transformed the library is through creating a location that teachers can use. Jen welcomes us into her classroom as often as we would like. She even houses several classes at once if all have the same common goal or if that is what is best for students at

that moment. Through creating a collaborative space for students to use the available resources, Jen has transformed the library from basically a study hall location into a needed and valuable classroom.

Jen has made the library a better place by welcoming students to come and stop in whenever they have a free moment. On display, students can find interesting STEM games, new fiction, SAT and ACT study guides, pictures of classmates, and even a therapy dog, Otter, who comes to visit students every Wednesday to provide a friendly smile and a kiss. Students know that not only will they be welcomed with open arms, but they will also find friends here. Through creating an early-morning book club, complete with doughnuts and milk, students have met friends and made relationships with other like-minded students. The library is now a destination for students during lunch if they do not want to sit alone in the cafeteria, and it is the spot for students to gather after school to complete assignments that could not quite be finished during class. As our homeroom students say, "The library just has a good vibe!"

Jen has also lobbied to have beneficial resources available to our students in the library. She has electronic databases that can be used by students outside of the school day. She extends library hours before and after school so that the library can be used for tutoring and studying. Jen spearheaded a committee that brought technology innovations to Northeastern, including two 3-D printers that are housed in the library. Jen envisioned the library as a maker-space where all students could reap the benefits of this new equipment.

Since Jen has been in charge, the library has become a place where students gather. Whether it's for freshmen orientation or to don their cap and gowns before taking the stage to graduate, students are drawn to the library. Jen has made the library the center and the heart of the school. No matter the time of year, the library is always a hive of activity. In the beginning of the year, parents gather at the library for an open house. She provides light refreshments and a warm environment to welcome parents and students as they begin this new chapter. In the middle of the year, Jen hosts an annual charity basket raffle for the Future Business Leaders of America. She offers her space because she knows that the library gets a lot of foot traffic. She sells the tickets, collects the money, and empties the bags when they get too full. Without her assistance, FBLA could never have donated more than five thousand dollars to charity since 2013. At the end of the year, Jen prints a diploma-sized card for each student where teachers and staff can write their well-wishes and memories for students to cherish in the years to come. Because of the success and response to this gesture, Jen has now added cards for teachers, as well. Seniors can thank the teachers who have helped them reach their goals, and teachers can see how much of an influence they have on the students here at Northeastern. The common theme here is that all of these actions are selfless. None of them benefits Jen directly, but they all make the library a better place for students and staff.

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

The library at Northeastern has been extremely influential on students and the learning process, and Jen is at the heart of this. Each day, four teachers can sign up to use the library as their classes' home base,

and the library services a full house each month. While these classes are in the library, the co-teaching that occurs is extremely beneficial to both students AND teachers. Students look to Jen as an additional resource, and she often has students staying after school because they know that Jen cares and she is willing to help revise their papers, assist in gathering research, and be a listening and mentoring adult. Some students stop in to get a quick “Hi” or a smile from Jen, and that concept of “starting with kindness,” our school’s motto this year, is evident when it comes to the library and how that influences students.

The library is not only home to many classes a day, but Jen actually becomes the lead teacher in a variety of courses; she has created course content for our Digital Concepts, Health, Foreign Language, and English classes, and as lead teacher, she finds unique, engaging ways to reach a variety of learners.

Jen uses her degree and skills as a special education teacher to help all students, but she is especially influential on our struggling students. Some higher achieving students have made the library their second home as well. Students who are enrolled in some of our anywhere/anytime learning courses choose to work in the library because they have Jen’s assistance as well as a calm environment. The library and the librarian provide a safe, welcoming environment for those high-achieving students who are taking college courses. Students who are dually enrolled often come in at odd times, and they head straight for the library, knowing they’ll get quiet time to study, assistance with research, and a warm smile. Without a doubt, our students agree that part of their success in college classes can be attributed to Jen’s knowledge and expertise.

Another particular instance that stands out is the undertaking of the senior project. Jen recognized a need for a re-organization of the senior project—in volunteering for this position, she was responsible for supervising students, managing staff members, and coordinating a year-long project that culminated in a two-day presentation period for all Northeastern seniors. Jen organized this thankless task for twelve years, simply because she felt it was in the students’ best interest for her to do so. She knew students would gain valuable life-long skills from the development and presentation of the projects, so she took on the overwhelming task of organizing nearly three hundred students each year. As teachers, we sometimes find it difficult to get thirty students to complete a task over a week’s time. Jen succeed at getting hundreds of students to create and present the culmination of a year-long project. And it should be noted that she achieved this feat each year for the twelve years she spearheaded this endeavor.

Finally, Jen facilitates the learning process for all students by knowing teacher expectations for a wide variety of assignments. For example, Jen knows that certain teachers expect single-sided copies, while other prefer all sources to be color-coded, while still others require students to use larger fonts. What student could keep track of these varying demands? And yet, Jen does so with ease and a smile. She is quick to remind students of these unique requirements and she goes out of her way to help students meet these expectations so that they can be successful in each classroom. Though this may seem like a small detail, the impact it has on the learning process for each of our nearly thirteen-hundred-person student body is incredible.

How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?

The Northeastern community is extremely lucky to have someone as devoted to it as Jen is. Jen consistently goes above and beyond her required duties to improve our school. Whether it is devotion to attending sporting events, musicals, inductions, or student performances, or simply being the one to reach out to a student in need, there is no one at Northeastern who does as much as Jen does to improve our community.

Northeastern is a high-poverty district, and what stands out most in our mind is what Jen did for one particular struggling student at our school. Ismael had failed English 9 twice before he found his way into the library one day. At this time, something had happened to him during his lunch period in the cafeteria, and he never disclosed what that was, but Jen opened her arms, and library doors, for him for every lunch period since then. She began by offering him snacks; he always seemed hungry but would never have asked for anything. Eventually, she realized that he wasn't eating any lunch, so she started packing a lunch for him every single day. She brought her personal leftovers from home or packed a special meal just for Ismael, but she always added a hot cup of tea to his lunch. The library became a second home for this particular student. It was here that his successes were celebrated with a special lunch of his choice when he earned honor roll, and then distinguished honor roll, for the first time. Jen checked in with Ismael's teachers on a weekly basis, and she is the reason that he made it to his senior year of high school and finally found success at Northeastern. Unfortunately, Ismael moved away this year, his senior year, but Jen continued to check on him once he left by contacting his new school's librarian in hopes he or she would be that spark for Ismael at his new school. It takes a special person to devote that time and effort to a student who hasn't yet found success, but Jen was just that for Ismael.

In addition to mentoring students, Jen also consistently shows her devotion to school by attending myriad events throughout the course of the school year. If any type of event is taking place, Jen makes sure she is there to support our students. She is their constant cheerleader, and even cuts pictures out of our district newsletter and the local paper of students whom have been featured. Students know that Ms. Newcome is the one to go to if they have questions about anything happening at Northeastern. For example, although she is no longer the senior project advisor, she makes sure she is knowledgeable about the requirements so that she can help our students be successful. She has done the same when it comes to when and where school events are taking place, and our community members will even directly call Jen to find out about a variety of school events that do not really have anything to do with her. The Northeastern community uses Jen as a file of knowledge about the school. Whether it deals with the library or not, it is certain that Jen either knows the answer, or it is clear that she will find out the answer. By attending so many events and being knowledgeable about everything that occurs in our school, Jen has become the go-to when students and community members have any questions. As a senior class advisor, it is extremely helpful that Jen is so aware of our students and their abilities. She uses every free moment to do something to benefit our community, and through learning more about students, she is able to help students be successful and become better community members themselves.

***This nomination was originally submitted in 2018. Upon resubmission, the nominator added the following information:**

Jen continues to help Northeastern High School in Manchester, PA through our Covid 19 shutdown. She has come up with new ways to engage students through virtual learning, and her role continues to grow and change as it becomes necessary!