

An Ode to the Library

When you push through the double doors of the Watauga Public Library, you expect to hear nothing. Well, maybe not nothing. Perhaps you expect the quiet beeping of books being checked out, the clicking of fingers on keyboards, the rustle of pages turning, or the low murmur of conversation between a patron and librarian.

Today, there are children running and laughing—a mother looking embarrassed and slightly frantic as she tries to run/walk after her brood. A man gets a phone call while working at a computer and proceeds to talk loudly, while a Children's Librarian strides to the back to ask him to take his call into the lobby. A bored-looking teen drops his backpack with a loud thump at the Reference Desk and asks, quite seriously, "Do you have any novels here?" The employee at the desk, unfazed by this ridiculous question, replies, "We sure do, what kind are you looking for?" and after a moment points him in the direction of the Fiction section. Yes, there is this and much more, in the library, supposedly the quietest place of all.

Watauga (pronounced wha-tog-a) is a small suburb of four square miles, nestled in the center of the larger cities of Fort Worth, Haltom City, North Richland Hills, and Keller. Watauga, though small in land mass, has approximately 24,230 residents, over 300 businesses, four schools, and one public library. Notably, 13,488 people of the total population (56%) have a library card. There are also 2,702 non-resident cards in the system, so it's not just the locals who have caught the library bug!

The Watauga Public Library is home to classic overstuffed chairs, sturdy tables, potted plants, and book shelves with over 70,000 books, movies, CDs, and other various library media. Book displays and bulletin boards plastered with eye-catching flyers for computer classes and upcoming events dominate the front area. Computers are located toward the back, and the large

Young Adult area has a “come and sit for awhile” vibe, with tall, café-style tables. Almost the entire back wall of the library is filled with floor-to-ceiling windows, which look out onto the city’s expansive park and lake.

A Tuesday morning

At 9:55 a.m., a crowd of about 35 people stands outside the doors of the library, even though there were only a handful of individuals outside ten minutes earlier. Why all the fuss? What big event has drawn these people so early on a Tuesday morning? It’s just the *library*, it’s not a rock concert. But there will certainly be music at this event, and definitely dancing. There will even be...bubbles! That’s right, bubbles. Because today dear reader, is Story Time, where anything is possible.

The library opens at 10:00 a.m. and the throng of people funnel through the doors, almost all heading toward the large meeting room for the program. There are two Story Times every Tuesday and Wednesday morning. Betsy Hamlin, a woman with shoulder-length blonde hair and a huge smile, waits to welcome them. A few of the children, mostly toddlers for this first story time, break away from their mothers and run to “Miss Betsy” and the shaggy dog puppet she is holding, named Barkley. Barkley, who has got to be the most affectionate puppet I’ve ever met, makes sure to kiss each and every child on the cheek as they enter the room.

Today’s Story Time theme is “pockets,” and you would be surprised at how many books, songs, and activities about pockets Miss Betsy has rounded up. During the half hour, the kids sing, learn about kangaroos, and even watch a puppet show that Miss Betsy performs solo. The kids learn about everything from colors, to rhyming, to the alphabet. One of the memorable moments is the song called “Brush Your Teeth,” which is a Story Time tradition and clearly a crowd favorite. The kids accompany the song with sets of jingle bells, provided by Miss Betsy,

and suddenly, the room sounds like Christmas. Everywhere you look kids are stomping and jumping as they jingle along to the song. At the end of each Story Time, Miss Betsy blows bubbles over the small clusters of children and families sitting on the floor. A small girl with lilac pants and a matching hair bow reaches up with wide eyes to touch a bubble and looks astonished, as it pops.

After Story Time, the moms of the first group stand in clumps around the Children's Section, chatting and gossiping, while their children tug at their shirts and ask, "Mommy, how many books can we get?" This is one of the best things about Story Time: besides all the education embedded in fun ways throughout the half hour, Story Time builds community. The kids become friends, and so do the moms, who find a local network of women with kids of the same ages. In Watauga, where, according to the city's website, "Over half of the households include children and youth less than 18 years of age," it is no wonder that Story Time and the Youth Section of the library are so popular.

A Thursday evening

On approaching the Reference Desk, you see Reka Reynolds, whose bright, smiling face never fails to make *you* smile in response. A young man with glasses and tattoos approaches to ask if the Library has any music magazines. "I was reading an article about Beck in one the other day, and I wanted to finish it." Does he remember the magazine, she asks. Of course, he does not. (This might annoy her if she didn't like a challenge). After a few clicks in the catalog, she finds the right article and a few related ones that he might be interested in. It may seem like a boring job, but Reference Librarians love finding answers.

Of course, the library is more than just books and research. It is not surprising to find numerous activities happening all at once, especially on Thursday evenings, one of two

weeknights that the library stays open until 8:00 pm. "On one memorable evening," says Reference Librarian Connie Barnes, a small woman with salt and pepper hair, "we had an ArtsNet concert going on with a large attendance, Homework Help Center was running, there were English tutors with their students in the study rooms, and the Adult Book Discussion group was meeting. All Internet stations were full with others waiting their turn. We are a true community gathering place."

A Saturday afternoon

This particular Saturday is the day that Hurricane Ike hit the area, although not with nearly the anticipated force. Today, four African American women, evacuees from Beaumont, are guests at the library. We do not know their names, but the woman who seems to be in charge of the group informs us that she, her mother, sister, and niece each need a computer so they can fill out forms for FEMA. "My husband had to stay in Beaumont, because he is a police officer," she tells us with a slightly worried expression. "We hope everybody is okay down there." Former Reference Librarian, Betty King, says that this sort of thing is not uncommon, a fact proven true two days later, when several more evacuees come to fill out forms. "If you don't have telephones and you don't have power, then you have to go somewhere where they have it," says King. Sometimes there are patrons that just need a little help, and the Library is happy to lend a helping hand.

The library does more than just provide Internet and books for the masses; it provides more information and resources than you ever imagined. Routinely they get questions about Medicare plans, tax forms, voting registration, and family law. There are also times when someone will ask a question that temporarily stumps the Librarian. What kind of wood are telephone poles made out of? (Mainly cedar.) What country in Europe is the only one that has

monkeys? (Gibraltar.) What do Casanova and Mao Zedong have in common? (Both were librarians.) So next time you have any type of question, call the Reference Desk at your local library—they'll probably have the answer, or they'll know how to find it.

A Wednesday afternoon

The Children's section is a jungle, both literally and figuratively. There is a large mural that takes up two walls, in which various animals are shown reading popular children's books. The fish in the lake reads *Rainbow Fish* and a bat reads *Stellaluna*—upside down, of course. The pillars around the mural are painted to resemble giant trees, and the ground is dominated by a giant blue carpet that looks like a pond. Children jump from lily pad to lily pad and are drawn to the giant alligator-shaped shelf of toddler books next to the “pond.” Nearby, kids discover the playhouse in the middle of a giant rectangular section of shelves full of story books. The playhouse, called “The Storybook Cottage,” doesn't always have children quietly reading inside. You often see kids sad to leave the library and the new friends they meet.

Mothers occasionally have to deal with stroller traffic jams, while older children play The Magic School Bus game on the children's computers. Occasionally, a curious child will pull their headphones out of the computer and suddenly the library will be filled with the cheery sounds of Blue's Clues, before a staff member follows the noise from their desk and pops the plug back in, with a reassuring smile to the child that seems to say, “You are not in trouble, but why don't we plug this back in?”

During the Summer Reading Club, the library swarms with families. “We have the largest Summer Reading Club in North Texas,” says Linda Evers, Head Youth Librarian. “We had almost 2,000 children participate this last summer.” Watauga's program is also one of the longest running, going strong from June through mid-August each summer. Luckily for the

library, the children who love it so much grow into teens who love it (and its staff) even more. Year round, the library has teen volunteers, and during the summer the number has a visible peak; Watauga had 47 teen volunteers alone last summer.

Tony Pulickal, who at 18 is still growing into his tall and gangly form, has been a Library volunteer since he was 13 and helped start the Library's Youth Chess Club. "The library has definitely changed who I am. I would not be who I am today without their friendship and support. Not one other library I've been to can boast that their librarians are as enthusiastic as Miss Linda or Miss Betsy. The community of Watauga is truly lucky to have such compassionate youth librarians." With such a devoted following, it is no wonder that the Children's Librarians walk around like rock stars—they really are kind of famous.

On any day

It's 4:20 in the afternoon and the library is jam-packed. A stroll past the study rooms shows people studying for exams, with their books and papers spread all over the desks. Children laugh loudly in the Youth Section and two phones are ringing at once in the front. The Chess Club is set up at the back, and a volunteer leans over to help a young boy with his next move. Meanwhile, Miss Betsy helps a woman home schooling her kids find a book on Greek Mythology. At Reference, Connie uses a mixture of Spanish and English to tell a man how to get a library card.

People come to the Watauga Public Library for many reasons, but once they do, most keep coming. One patron summed it up nicely with, "I love this place."