

Ode to the Library

by Sarah Livingston

When you push through the double doors of the 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 is all of this and more. There are children running and laughing—with 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, all of this and 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 size, 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—it's not just the locals that have caught the Library bug!

The Watauga Public Library is home to the classic overstuffed chairs, sturdy tables, and book shelves that tower with over 70,000 books and media. Bulletin boards plastered in eye-catching flyers, and book displays dominate the front area, while potted plants make the Library feel more like home. Computers are 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 floor-to-ceiling windows, which look out onto the city's expansive park and lake.

A Tuesday morning

At 9:55, a large crowd of people stands outside the front doors of the Library. Even though there were only a handful of individuals outside at 9:45, the crowd has now swollen to about 35 people. So why all the fuss? What big event has drawn this crowd 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 there will definitely be 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 and the throng of people funnel through the doors and almost all head toward the large meeting room for the program. 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 (there are two every Tuesday and Wednesday), break away from their mothers and flat out 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 them that Miss Betsy has rounded up. During the half hour, the kids sing, learn about kangaroos, and even watch a puppet show that Miss Betsy manages to perform solo. And despite the seemingly random theme, the kids somehow learn about everything from colors, to rhyming, to the alphabet. One of the standout moments is the song called “Brush Your Teeth” which is a Story Time tradition and is clearly a crowd favorite. The kids accompany the song with their own 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, though not unhappy, 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 at the same ages and with similar problems. 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 are so popular.

A Thursday evening

On approaching the Reference Desk, you see Reka Reynolds, who has a bright, smiling face that 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 to some, 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 in the Library, especially on Thursday evenings, one of two weeknights that the Library stays open until 8:00. “On one memorable evening, 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,” stated Reference Librarian Connie Barnes, a small woman with salt and pepper hair. “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 force that was anticipated. 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.” 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 a question, almost any question really, call the Reference Desk at your local library —they’ll probably have the answer.

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 carpet that looks like a pond. Children jump from lily pad to lily pad and most 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, but you often see kids sad to leave the Library and the new friends they met within.

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 Children’s section and for that matter the whole 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 is also one of the longest running, with programming going strong from June through mid-August each summer. Luckily for the Library, the children that love it so much grow into teens that 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 hopping. 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."