

Libraries, and reading have always meant independence to me.

The library of my youth in suburban Boston was a rather grand classical sandstone building, with a front entrance created as homage to a Roman palace. It is an imposing building, built in 1892, that was set rather incongruously among the New England clapboard homes and Boston-style triple-deckers. Yet as formal as its structure was, it was a welcoming place that was free and open to all. It offered solace, quiet, knowledge and discovery. It was the first “adult” place that I made my own.

I was able to walk to the library as a youngster and select my own books —only restricted by the number I could bring home each week. The children’s room was a comfortable place. The books were worn and well-loved. It was not a sophisticated town and the choices were ordinary for the time. I worked my way through Nancy Drew and Trixie Belden and other standard offerings for the 60s. In time, I became more confident and more curious. There was no teen category, no YA books to move into. Beyond the children’s room there was a labyrinth of rooms and stacks and stairs connecting to the main library. I made my way across tentatively and discovered the stacks crowded with incredible choices, the vaulted reading room was hushed and ready for me. I was able to hunker down, anonymously, and quietly, steadily read my way into the adult books. There was no one censoring my selections; they were purely mine. The library represented a rush of freedom and independence. It was a solitary experience, yes, but an invitation to explore ideas, a haven to grapple with new worlds.

While my first library experience was a solitary one, my adult experience with the Montclair Library has been truly a communal one. By the time we moved to Montclair in 1990, with 2 young children in tow and a third soon to come, the national culture of libraries had changed. Now the library is not just a monolithic structure of knowledge and literature, but serves more as a community center. The Main Branch on South Fullerton is not a romantic building at all, built in the industrial and functional 1950s architecture, but it is a building brimming with activity. And it was a Library that supported us as a young family in a new town. The librarians came to know our names, we joined the storytimes

and summer reading programs, and used all the resources to navigate a new home. The Montclair Public Library was central to welcoming our family into this community.

More than 25 years later, the Library is solid in its role as community center. While still offering a quiet place to discover new books and comb through old classics, dig into the resources of history, politics, and science, it is also the center of all that makes this town special. The library serves as the home to Succeed2gether tutoring program, Adult Literacy and ESOL classes. The Adult School offers a wide variety of stimulating programs. The Open Book/Open Mind series hosts authors discussing their work. People gather for the Write Group, poetry slams, chess and bridge clubs, and view the work of local artists in the art gallery. Past and present celebrations include Booktoberfests, the Little Read, and the Grapes of Wrath. All this, and yet... there is still room for an awkward kid to find that place, that chair, in the Library that offers the space and the books to learn, discover and grow.

Margot Sage-EL is the owner of Watchung Booksellers, celebrating 25 years in Montclair. She is extremely grateful for the shared mission of promoting and supporting literacy, and values all that the partnership with the Library has brought to her family and her business.

Tax-deductible donations to the Montclair Public Library Foundation's annual fund drive, now underway, may be made to the Foundation at [montclairplf.org](http://montclairplf.org) or by mail to 50 South Fullerton Avenue, Montclair, N.J., 07042.