

Sixteen minutes was all it took. As long as I read over fifteen minutes each night, I earned a gold star, so sixteen it was. But still, the time moved like rush hour traffic. I was not a natural reader. I read slowly, which frustrated me, especially when my friends finished books in half the time it took me. I was even more frustrated when they could read books that my fourth grade teacher suggested might be too hard.

But I was stubborn. I was determined to read, and do it well. I sat in front of my bookshelf, pulling out everything from Shel Silverstein to JK Rowling to Judy Blume. I waded through page after page, my finger guiding my eyes through worlds of wizards and potions, tweens and turmoil. What had once been a daunting task became easier with each book I read. I found girls like me who could be quiet and shy, yet brave and mischievous. I realized I could be cunning, and a little naive, like Peggy Ann McKay, outspoken like Hermione, resilient like Deenie. The more I saw myself in the characters I encountered, the more I wanted to read. I no longer counted the minutes I read, and when I ran out of books on my shelf, I went to the Montclair public library.

I learned to love the library by accident. I participated in the summer reading program, and while the prizes I earned for logging books were enticing, I don't remember what I won. What I do remember is going to the library, scanning the shelves and finding the just right book. The one that would let my imagination dance in ballrooms of thoughts and ideas.

I found myself back in the library this summer for a very different purpose. As I worked on a research paper on American Girl dolls and the fashioning of girlhood, the reference librarians helped me track down articles from obscure journals, and I utilized inter-library loans to get books that were too expensive to buy or otherwise unavailable. While the library had always been a place of fantasy, it also became a valued academic resource.

At times, my mind would wander away from my research, and I would think about my great-grandmother, an immigrant from Lithuania. She couldn't afford books. She would spend hours at her local library, and waited eagerly each month for *St. Nicholas Magazine*. She developed friendships with the librarians who fueled her love of reading, and the library was her community center. It was a place where she saw women who could read (her own mother could not), a place where she could come in from the cold, a place where she met children from different backgrounds who came together in a common pursuit of reading.

My reasons for going to the library are different than my great grandmother's, but despite the one hundred years that separate us, we share the same love for it. The library gives me a place to sit with a book, to be transported into the worlds authors create, where I can become someone's best friend, sister, enemy. Now, rather than putting down my book after sixteen minutes, I crave sixteen more. I don't need a gold star, I don't need a prize, just hand me a book and I'm already a winner.

Betsy Zaubler is a senior at Newark Academy and a Montclair resident. She has received a Governor's award in Art Education. Her play "Thanksgiving Surprise" won an Honorable Mention in Princeton University's Ten Minute Play contest.

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