A Big Impact in a Small Town

It is with great pleasure that the Trustees of the Olivia Rodham Memorial Library in Nelson, New Hampshire, nominate our librarian, Kristine Finnegan, to be the NHLTA Library Director of the Year.

Why does Kris deserve this honor? There are many reasons; chief among them is the significant contribution that the Library, under Kris’s leadership, makes to our community. Kris accomplishes this with such limited resources that it never ceases to amaze the Trustees and delight the thrifty town folks of Nelson. With limited hours, a small budget, and a small library, Kris makes a very big difference in the town of Nelson, New Hampshire. Nelson is a town of 729 people, spread over 23 square miles. We have no store, no gas station, no retail businesses, and no post office. The Library is the center of our community. Kris has been the Nelson Library Director for 20 years. There’s no time or space to cover every year and her every contribution. Instead, we will focus on Kris’s first years at the Library and then the most recent years, to give you an idea of what she has done for our town every single year that she has been our librarian.

Kristine Finnegan
In 1992, a search was under way for a new librarian. Kris wanted the job. Armed only with a Bachelors Degree in Education, Kris was selected as the new Nelson librarian. She immediately enrolled in the Library Techniques Certificate Program offered at Keene State College. She took courses at night, studying Collection Development, Reference Services, Cataloging, Administration, Library Programming, and more. It took several years, but Kris got her Library Techniques Certificate.

Over the years as Nelson librarian, Kris has continued her education. She attends the Children’s Literature and the Children’s Story Telling Festivals at Keene State. She’s taken story telling and puppeteer courses, courses on confidentiality, computer courses, classes on how to manage difficult or aggressive patrons, and, of course, grant writing.

Kris started writing grant requests as soon as she started as the Nelson librarian. In her first year as librarian, Kris got a grant for the Library's first computer. That was 1993.

During her early years at the Nelson Library, when our Library was open only 12 hours a week, Kris became the full time librarian at the Dublin School for 7 years. She left the Dublin School when her second daughter was born. Later, Kris was the librarian in Harrisville for 3 years, working there 10 hours a week until they hired a full time librarian. Kris still works 4 hours a week in Harrisville as the Children’s Librarian. At both the Dublin School and the Harrisville Library, Kris turned what were essentially “book rooms” into proper functioning libraries, recreating card catalogs at both locations.
When Kris became Library Director, the Nelson Library was in its old original building. It had moldy books, no water, no bathroom, and the windows were nailed shut. The small building was perched on the side of the hill overlooking town common. There were slate steps leading up to the Library from the common. Each step was a different height and the steps were treacherous, especially in winter. A number of patrons would phone ahead and tell Kris what books they wanted, or they would ask her to select something for them. Then they would drive to the base of the hill below the Library and Kris would go down and meet them with their books. Kris was happy to do this, but she knew that what the Library really needed was accessibility.

Kris talked with the Trustees about the need for the Library to be handicapped accessible. There was no way to make the old Library on the hill comply with the relatively new, 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Trustees presented the idea of a new Library at the March 1994 town meeting. They were turned down, but committed to try again. They reworked the plans, made the case for a new Library, and a year later at town meeting, the plans were approved. Within 6 months, the funding for the Library was raised from donations and a grant. Kids emptied their piggy banks to help. Kris wrote the grant application and received $18,000 towards the new building. The whole town undertook the task of building the new Library - and this in a town that doesn’t necessarily like change and doesn’t like to spend money. A beautiful new Library was built, attached to the Town Hall by a handicapped accessible entrance and bathrooms.

During this period, Kris also did the research, documentation, and paperwork to qualify the Town Hall and the Old Library for listing on the New Hampshire Register of Historic Places.
Kris was an integral member of the team that designed the new Library. She visited many other libraries, getting ideas for lights, magazine shelves, placement of her desk, and a small kitchen/storage room, among other things. And the new Library has stood the test of time. It continues to serve us well and is a source of community pride.

Kris supervised the move into the new Library. On moving day, she arranged for the children in town to bring their wagons and move the books by wagon from the old Library to the new one. What a wonderful opportunity for the children of Nelson to be part of the new Library.
Fast Forward to a Typical Year at the Nelson Library

In 2011, we had 4,987 patron visits to the Library, a leveling off after years of sharp increases. Circulation was 7,419 volumes, up slightly from the previous year. According to the most recent New Hampshire State Library statistics, in 2010 we had more patron visits and a higher circulation than any other town of our size in the state, and the most reference questions and the highest adult program attendance in towns of 1,000 or less.

Last year, the Nelson Library was open 18 hours a week. Kris worked 20 hours a week. Our library aide worked a total of 187 hours during the year. In 2011, we had 472 volunteer hours. The Library has a number of very good volunteers. Kris manages those volunteers, including teenagers, giving them meaningful work to do and positive reinforcement that keeps them coming back.

Summer Reading Program 2011

Summertime at the Nelson Library

Kris runs a well-attended Summer Reading Program for children each year. She recruits volunteers to do special presentations for the children, like music, bookmaking, and bird watching. (Oh, to be a kid in Nelson!)

The finale of the Summer Reading Program is always a special show in the Town Hall. In 2009, a record 112 people turned out for the magic show that Kris arranged. That was 17% of our population! (The magician’s fee was partially covered by the Kids, Books, and Arts grant that Kris gets every year).
The Library hosts a series of four Library Summer Forums on Thursday nights in July in Nelson Town Hall. Between 45 and 125 people attend presentations on topics ranging from Sheep in Nelson – Past & Present, to Orchids in New Hampshire, to the Story of Cape Breton Music, to a Dramatic Reading of Robert Penn Warren's epic poem "The Ballad of Billie Potts". All presentations are by Nelson residents. The evenings start with music by local musicians and end with refreshments in the Library. These Summer Forums are a much looked forward to part of summer in Nelson. The talks are captured on video and archived in the Library. Kris makes a special effort to welcome “summer folk” and many of them return year after year to enjoy the services and community available at our Library.
During the Year at the Nelson Library

Part of each school year is an enrichment program at the Library. All students in the Nelson school (K-6) come to the Library in three groups. Kris teaches the younger children basic library skills and she helps the older children hone their skills by doing a research project at the Library. (See attached letter from the Nelson School Principal).

During the school year, Kris hosts a weekly story time for children, which includes snacks, a story, and an activity lead by Kris or a volunteer.
There is also a year-round book group for adults, led by Kris. This group of loyal members attend each meeting and a there’s a broader group that reads the chosen book each month.

Special Events at the Library

Just to press the point that Kris makes a little go a long way, the Nelson Library 2011 budget, including personnel expenses, was $29,992. That covers all of the regular activities outlined above, as well as special activities that happen in any given year.

In 2011, Nelson had a contested race for two selectmen positions. The Library hosted a Candidates’ Night for the five candidates to present their views to the citizens of the town. Eighty-four people attended and submitted written questions to a moderator. The moderator then posed the questions to the candidates in a non-partisan manner. Civility prevailed and everyone went home feeling good about their town.

In 2010, the Library began hosting a Game Night once a month through the darkest months of January, February, March and April. On a typical Game Night, 15 to 25 Nelsonites gather to play scrabble, dominoes, or a board game. A good time is had by all and a new tradition has been established.
Anytime during the year, if someone has an interesting topic that they are willing to talk about, Kris lines them up. A couple of years ago, there was a well-attended talk on those old time slipstick calculators called slide rules! This year there was a presentation on how to make violins. Forty-two people came to see how violins are made and to accommodate everyone we had to move the presentation next door to Town Hall.

Kris also arranges visiting authors. This year, the Library hosted local author Dudley Laufman, who read from his new book of poems. In 2011 the Library hosted children's author Rebecca Upjohn for a reading of her book Lily and the Paper Man. In 2009, Kris had author Donna Woolfolk Cross join the monthly adult book group by speakerphone to discuss her book, Pope Joan: A Novel.

During the ice storm of December 2008, Nelson was without power for almost two weeks. Once the town provided a generator for the Library, it stayed open extra hours in the evenings to accommodate townpeople. People came in to get books, charge their cell phones, or just to warm up. During a heavy snowstorm in 2011, Kris managed to “roll” over the snow bank in front of the Library, make her way up the un-shoveled front walk, get the door open, get into the Library and phone a trustee to come and shovel the walk. There was no heat or lights, but before long, the Library was full of people who had come to get a book or to just visit with their neighbors. The Library is the center of town. We may not have a post office, a store, or a gas station, but we do have the Library and we do have Kris.
Kris Conquers the Computer

Kris, who says she is not a “computer person”, has managed our new high-speed wireless system; again with the help of volunteers she recruited. She made available the ability to download audio books at the Library or from home with a library card. In 2011 she added eBooks to our list of services. Last year, 660 eBooks or downloadable audio books were used by Nelson library patrons.

In 2009, the Library undertook the design and maintenance of a website for the Town of Nelson www.townofnelson.com. Now, people in Nelson know what’s going on in town. Participation at almost every event is up as a result of better communication. The website gets between a thousand and 1,300 “hits” a month. Again, remember there are only 729 of us in Nelson. In the July, 2012, issue of New Hampshire Magazine, our website was named Editor’s Pick “Best Municipal Website”. This year, Kris has started a Facebook page for the Library.

2012 New Hampshire Magazine Editor’s Pick for Best Municipal Website

The Town of Nelson Website, Sponsored by the Library
Kris serves as a catalyst of much that happens in Nelson. For example, Kris received a mailing from the New Hampshire State Library urging towns to apply for a Moose Plate grant to preserve and digitize town records. Kris passed the information on to the town archivist, who applied and got the grant. As a result, the Nelson town and school records from 1802 to 1885 are now available on the Library’s town website. The town website also serves as host to articles about Nelson’s history written by local historians.

In 2009, Kris got a two-year grant from the Gates Foundation to buy new computers, printers and support services for computers to be used by Library patrons. Applying for that grant was a complicated process designed for much larger libraries. It was Kris’s stick-to-itiveness that enabled us to get that grant. We have two new PCs, a new iMac, plus a new printer, all for patron use. The total dollar amount of that grant, including matching funds, which Kris also arranged, was $5,200.

Late in 2010, Kris began the arduous task of automating the Library’s card catalog. This multiyear task is beginning to pay off and save time as cards are being phased out as the collection is barcoded and added to Library World. This complicated task was undertaken with few additional resources and reliant on the help of volunteers. The Library has since received a grant which allows more rapid completion of the project. Since 2003, Library usage has gone up 40%, circulation has increased 92%, and computer usage has gone up 260%. In the midst of this increased volume, Kris has somehow found the time and resources to automate the card catalog and prepare the Library for the future.

And There’s More

Kris is active in the community of librarians. She belongs to the Nubanusit Library Association, which is a group of about 25 small libraries that get together and share information. Kris takes her turn to host the Nubanusit Association monthly meeting at the Nelson Library and reports that the recent meeting she hosted was acclaimed as “the best ever”. There was music by local Nelson musicians as the librarians were gathering. For the program, Kris arranged for author, Hilary Weismann Graham, to talk about writing her book, *Reunited*.

Over the years, so much has been accomplished in our small Library, for example, two Master’s theses have been written using the Library resources. Kris is a master of interlibrary loan, borrowing 1,214 books last year. If you want a particularly obscure book, Kris can get it for you. If you need a book on a certain subject, Kris can help you locate it and get it for you. Kris has earned a special place in the hearts of the home schooling community for all the good work she does for them (see attached testimonial). For genealogists, Kris can order materials from around the country and have them delivered to the Library. Nelson has a small library with only 8,314 volumes, but Kris has put the world at our fingertips.

Kris encourages town use of the Library for public meetings, and almost every committee in town meets at the Library (the Agricultural Commission, the Conservation Commission, the Old Home Day Committee).

Over the years, Kris has collected books by Nelson authors and books about Nelson. A local historian writes a paragraph or two on each book identifying the author’s role in Nelson or pointing out the books relevance to Nelson. This information is added to the front of each book to provide context to the reader. These books are featured in our Library and are very popular with the patrons. Kris also clips newspaper...
articles about our town or our citizens. She puts them on display while they are current, and then keeps them together for ongoing general reference.

Author May Sarton lived and worked in Nelson and is buried here. Her house is just across the street from the Library. Kris recognized the need for the Library to serve as a source of information on May Sarton. A full collection of her work is available as well as a “clip file” of articles written about her in the media. Researchers come to the Nelson library to study May Sarton.

In Conclusion

Kris has been the Library Director in Nelson for 20 years. Throughout her tenure, she has made the Library a welcoming place for the whole community. Kris is an amazing town resource. She knows most everyone and everything in town. Someone will come in the Library door and ask a question, almost any question, and Kris will know the answer, or know where to find the answer. The Library feels like home, yet, it’s remarkably up to date, with high speed wireless internet access, downloadable books, and the latest computers for patrons to use. Kris accomplishes all of this with her abundant common sense and down-to-earth personal warmth. We hope that you can see why we are recommending our librarian, Kristine Finnegan, as NHLTA Library Director of the Year.