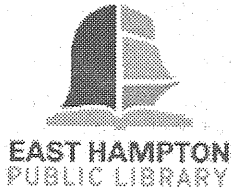


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Library Honored for Role in Village Center Success

by Elizabeth Regan

The East Hampton Public Library has earned one of the Connecticut Library Association's top community service awards for its role in making the Village Center a more vibrant place.



Library director Ellen Paul accepted the Excellence in Public Library Service Award for towns with fewer than 15,000 residents, along with awards for best new website and best new logo, at the association's annual conference last Tuesday.

"I've always thought it is not up to a community to make a library great; it's up to a library to make a community great," Paul told the *Rivereast* this week.

The recognition caps two years of work stemming from a series of "community conversations" about the future of East Hampton. The series of summer meetings back in 2017 were initiated by the newly formed library advisory board and the newly hired director as a way to bring the residents' vision for their community into focus.

"We didn't ask people what they wanted from their library. We asked people what they wanted for East Hampton," Paul said.

It turned out residents' biggest concerns revolve around the Village Center, according to Paul. Participants in the community forums cited empty storefronts, decaying buildings and a general lack of vitality going back decades.

The library's solution was a range of initiatives to encourage new businesses in the town's historic center and to bolster existing ones.

A dozen programs brought local business owners into the library to lead programs ranging from a bicycle maintenance workshop to a daddy-daughter hair styling class.

The library also joined forces with the volunteer Service Corps of Retired Entrepreneurs and local experts for workshops to help promote new business in town. Paul said the library's "Simple Steps to Start Your Own Business" seminar series was taught by locals like attorney Kenneth Barber, accountant Ted Hintz and marketing professional Mary Ann Dostaler.

One of the Village Center success stories that emerged from the entrepreneurship series is Black Walnut Artisan Bread Company, which opened its doors late last year to early-morning

sellout crowds. Owner Christian Michalowski, who has been critical of the bureaucratic aspects of starting a business in town, had nothing but praise for the library program he described as instrumental in getting his business off the ground.

"It opened a lot of doors for me and also was very educational," he said. "It gave me a lot of insight."

Paul said the library's Village Center focus led to a "Shop Local" holiday program, which provided shoppers with a raffle ticket every time they made a purchase at one of 12 participating businesses during the holiday season. The customers were invited to bring the tickets to the library to enter to win a basket of products and gift cards donated by local merchants.

There were 450 tickets tossed into the raffle, according to Paul.

"Each one of those represents money that was spent in the Village Center," she said. "That was money that stayed in East Hampton. It didn't go to a big box store or online."

AirLine Cycles owner Brian Holdt credited the library with playing a significant part in the recent "rebirth" of the Village Center.

"Our village has had its ups and downs through the years, and the last few years have been a slow climb up out of a pretty serious slump," he wrote in a letter of support for the library's award nomination.

He credited the library with luring more and more people to an area that's "off the beaten track."

"The holiday foot traffic this season was definitely much stronger than in past years, and many customers excitedly entered the store with arms full of shopping bags and a fist full of raffle tickets. It wasn't quite Wonka's golden ticket, but it was close," Holdt wrote.

Two other Connecticut Library Association awards recognize the library's efforts over the past two years to rebrand itself in an era marked by a new director, a resurrected advisory board and reinvigorated Friends of the Library support.

The new website and logo complement the internal changes that in 2018 led to a 20 percent increase in borrowing compared to the prior year, according to Paul. The increase is spurred in large part by the decision to join the statewide Libraries Online consortium, which promotes the sharing of services and resources among more than 35 participating libraries.



A contingent of East Hampton Public Library staff members, volunteers and supporters descended on the Connecticut Library Association's Annual Meeting and awards ceremony on April 30 to celebrate the library's three recognitions. From left are Michael Miscalco, East Hampton town manager; Michele Kaminski, children's librarian; Mimi Jones, Library Advisory Board member; Tessa Handy, library assistant; Ellen Paul, library director; Melissa Jones, Library Advisory Board member; Victoria Fielding, Friends of the Library president; Jack Solomon, Library Advisory Board member; Cyndi Shirshac, Library Advisory board vice chairman; and Amy Ordonez, Library Advisory Board chairman.

Paul said the consortium gives library patrons access to 2.6 million items in all the participating libraries combined, compared to just the 65,000 items in the East Hampton library.

Victoria Fielding, a mother of three children under the age of 10 and the president of the Friends of the Library, said she used to be more inclined to visit other, larger libraries with more offerings before East Hampton joined the statewide consortium.

Now, they're more likely to stay local.

"We're frequently able to get things on reserve from other libraries and they're here super fast," she said. "It's nice to be able to support and also spend that time in the library that your tax dollars are going to."

Fielding over the past year has worked to increase membership in the Friends of the Library organization that she said has been carried for more than a decade by a singular friend: Alan Hurst.

It's now up to 57 members, according to Fielding.

The Friends group focuses on fundraising and publicity, while the advisory board takes a broader and more policy-based look at library operations and its role in town.

Library Advisory Board member Mimi Jones

told the *Rivereast* she first came to the library in 1975 as the mother of young children – but hasn't always found it to be the welcoming place it turned into when Paul arrived.

"When you come into the library, you feel so much more welcome now," she said. "There's just so much going on that every week there's some kind of program, almost every day."

Paul replaced the former director, Sue Berescik, who resigned suddenly in late 2016.

The library's new award-winning logo is a testament to East Hampton's unique history and the library's place in it, according to Paul, Fielding and Jones. The graphic was created by the Massachusetts-based Stirling Technologies design firm with input from the library's advisory board.

Paul said the logo combines the town's bell and ship making past, while the open pages at the bottom "does triple duty" as a book, the bottom of a bell and ripples on the river.

"This logo wouldn't work anywhere else but here," she said. "You see it and you know this is East Hampton."