

Newman Riga Library Director begins new chapter

Donna Haire expert at knowing good books

by Terra Osterling

Donna Haire, Director of the Newman Riga Public Library, was a nine-year-old in the small village of Laupahoehoe, Hawaii when the idea of what a public library should be like was planted in her mind.

The small store-front library started by her fourth grade teacher may be years and miles from the Newman Riga Public Library, but Churchville area library patrons owe it a debt of gratitude. Donna Haire, Library Director since 1984, will retire at the end of this year, leaving a legacy shaped by that early experience with good books and a librarian who truly cared.

In Laupahoehoe, the library, says Haire, "Made such a difference in our lives, and I thought that's how a library should be." After thirty years at Newman Riga, Donna Haire's focus on making a difference through customer service has not only sustained the library, it has defined it.

Haire landed in the area by way of a VISTA posting in downtown Rochester. She worked in a sweat-equity housing program helping families to navigate the business of a household and life. Haire and her husband, also a VISTA volunteer, liked the area enough to return for good. She then went to work doing marketing research for Monroe Savings Bank.

Upon moving to Churchville in 1979, Haire says she felt drawn to the little library. "It spoke my name from the minute I saw it, and I thought it was the prettiest building in town," she recalls. "I said to myself, 'one day I'm going to work in that building.'"

When an ad appeared in the newspaper for the library director position, she immediately applied.

Haire was hired by Dick Stowe, a 25-year Newman Riga Library Board trustee who is now retired. "Donna Haire offers a nice mix of skills," says Stowe. "She has an unusual capability to deal with the academic part of the library director job, as well as the management part. And, Donna knows how to provide a great product with a personal touch."

Building expansion was already in the air when Haire started, and leading a library under construction presented obvious challenges. That was just the beginning for a library on the verge of a new millennium.

Automated book checkout, computers for patron use, and transitioning from card catalogs to a computerized system were next. "Donna had some complicated and sometimes difficult situations that she coped with," remarks Stowe about that era of change.

Advances in technology and how they changed running and using a library, were, says Haire, akin to going from horse and buggy to moon travel.

"The availability of the internet is the best thing that could happen to any small



Donna Haire, Director of the Newman Riga Library, outside the library which is at the center of Churchville's business district. Photograph by Walter Horylev.

library," says Haire. "The World Wide Web expanded the walls for the patron, and created far more business independence for the library."

Sue Davis, a longtime library board member and current treasurer, says that Haire is known for her frugal management of the library, remarking, "She is a wizard at staying within budget."

Making a connection

Budget-conscious library management is second only to Haire's mission of connecting people with both information and literature. Chiefly, she says, by helping library patrons to learn throughout their

lives, including how to conduct life more efficiently. Haire attributes Newman Riga's success to this focus on good books and patrons' needs.

The concept of reader advisory, Haire's specialty, is perhaps the greatest secret weapon of small libraries. Haire has insisted that each new book be carefully vetted, and she knows the books as well as the patrons. This boutique service keeps patrons coming back, and may be why statistics on libraries.org show that Newman Riga circulates far more books in proportion to the town's population than all other west side libraries.

"I know that if I go to the library, I don't

even need to go to the bookshelf," says Davis. "To walk in and to have Donna ready to recommend a book for any patron is a great asset for the library; her knowledge and her care for patrons is something that will be hard to replace."

Haire has been especially good at connecting with children, potential converts for this librarian's self-described literature evangelism. Her own first-hand early library experience taught her that children respond well to an adult listening to and caring about their thoughts on a book, so she has always made it a point to ask. One young patron recently read **Pippi Longstocking**. Haire was tickled that the girl enjoyed the book because "[Pippi] was bad, and she got in trouble."

Haire also made it a point to tap local talent for family friendly library programs: magicians, clowns, a classical guitarist who used Newman Riga as a venue to prepare for national tours, many author lectures and book signings, and the display case that highlights the skills and interests of community members. Plus, she designed the fiercely competitive and prize-laden summer reading programs.

Reflecting on the day-to-day of 30 years, Haire says, "It's a calming routine when I walk in each morning, quietly making order out of chaos. I love the feel and even the smell of the library."

She speaks poignantly of the days when her afternoons were full of researchers of all ages. The innovations of internet research, Haire says, have funneled patrons away from learning about authoritative resources in library-based research. Libraries, she hopes, will try, in the face of change, to maintain a dedication to education.

"I only know how to work," Haire says of retirement, having not allowed herself time to think about next steps. She has no major travel plans, but will continue her hobby of visiting and photographing small libraries that exude character.

Summing up her career at Newman Riga Public Library, Haire says, "This has been the job of a lifetime, and I couldn't imagine any job more suited to me. But, I know it's time for a new chapter. I just don't know what the book is."

On the job

Newman Riga Public Library has been Donna Haire's home away from home, and the people and memories of three decades include:

- A construction supplier came to deliver rebar, approaching the library desk asking for the truck to be unloaded. Haire somehow worked it out without having to do it herself.
- Spending hours one Christmas Eve looking for an escaped hamster that was intended to surprise her children the next morning, sure that her flashlight beam would draw the police.
- Raising Stanley the cardinal after he was orphaned by a cat prowling library grounds.
- In the early days of the online purchasing, a truck filled with thousands of books pulled up to make a delivery after she accidentally ordered too many copies.
- Tracking down Clifford Stoll, a Buffalo native and nationally famous bestselling author, hoping to arrange his visit to the library, but missing his return call when an unknowing new-hire said Haire was (as usual) 'busy with a patron.'
- A longtime patron routinely approaching the desk to cheekily order a cheeseburger and soft drink. Learning of Haire's retirement, she said he remarked that the food service had never been very good and he hopes the new director can cook.

Coming up:

An open house reception will take place at the Newman Riga Public Library on Wednesday, January 14, 2015. Come by to thank Donna Haire for 30 years, and get one last book recommendation. Time to be announced.

Donna Haire's favorite memory:

Connecting the right book to the right person. "I read a lot and know all my patrons personally. I know what they read so I know what book to connect with a person. It's called reader's advisory." Photograph by Walter Horylev.

Musings:

Unusual happenings in her memory of the job - "A colleague and I were trying to move a coat rack into the basement. It got stuck on the way down and remained for two days while we figured out what we were going to do about it.

•Back in the old days, in the summer reading program, children would take out books and return them and give an oral book report to me. Because I was the chief cook and bottle washer, and we had a leak in the bathroom, I had to fix it. I was trying with all my strength to turn the water off as a little boy, 8 or 9, proceeded to deliver his oral book report without skipping a beat. It went on and on while I kept trying to shut off the water. He's now in his 30s but I see his mother occasionally and remind her of that story."

Photo and text by Walter Horylev.

