

2024 Difference is You Award Nominee highlights from nomination letters

Alejandra Young | Bookkeeper | 7 years

We all know that fund accounting is not easy - payroll involves keeping track of taxes, PERF, Medical insurance, life insurance, eye, dental, health savings, etc. Then the budgets for grants, bills from remodel/addition projects and learning a new budgeting system. With all of this she is unflappable. Ale' is the queen of organization and her door is always open, and her office is always welcome.

Now imagine doing all of this, when English is not your first language. We had the joy of celebrating with Ale' when she achieved her American citizenship near the end of 2020. We ask a lot of a bookkeeper; it is not an easy job. But with Ale we have not only an excellent bookkeeper, but so much more.

Amy Morgan | Circulation Administrator | 18 years & 14 years at this library

To my mind, Amy's finest talent may be in her ability to hire good employees. I'm not sure how she does it, but she seems to be able to recognize the traits in people that result in excellent library staff. She seems to have a natural sense about people, and she is not distracted by their looks, is not discouraged by physical limitations, or dissuaded by past life histories. The result has been a diverse circulation staff that she believes in, some of whom have been advanced to other positions, or have left us to excel at other jobs, or who continue to excel here at customer service under her guidance.

Her faith in her staff, and the opportunities that she has given them has been life-changing for many employees over the years and has been a wonderful thing for our library.

Anne Kirchgraber-McKee | Administrator of Youth Services | 20 years

It's not uncommon to see Miss Anne sporting fox ears and a tail at children's programs, or stomping around in knee high rubber boots, or smuggling rescued kittens up the back stairs and into her office. I love it when she shares the newest children's books that she loves "Look at this, the artwork is just gorgeous" or "You have to read this, it's just....Awww," clasping her heart and tearing up.

She manages the largest staff in the library, deals with children, teens, and their adults ... not always an easy task ... manages the budgets for the floor and the programmers, and schedules all our summer reading and Christmas season events each year.

Anne is also the one I turn to when I need sound counseling. She is the one most grounded in library philosophy and principles, able to slice through uncertainties, controversies, and conflicts to give sound common sense advice. She is keenly observant and understanding of human nature and others' emotions and can usually explain "why" people do the things they do.

I sometimes think of Anne as the conscience of the library. She is accepting, welcoming, and cognizant of the beauty of all the diversity of humankind. She is protective of the planet in everything she does, and models better practices in all of us. Brave and Strong has been her motto, and she has been and she is.

B.J. Bennett | English Language Teacher/Adult Education | 3 years

We had been trying to start an English language class at the library, knowing that for a significant number of people in our community English was not their first language. We would advertise but nobody signed up, or called, or showed up. Our two local manufacturers began working with our Adult Education Center to help employees achieve a high school equivalency while working, and they noted that an English class would be of great help to them and many of their employees.

Some of our staff suggested that we talk to B.J. who was retired, multi-talented, and looking for something significant to do. We talked to B.J. about the idea and she immediately ran with it, researching how to teach non-English speakers English, and preparing materials. We waited for several weeks until the first couple of students showed up and the next week there were a few more and then a few more. Then her students began to tell their friends about her.

B.J. has become more than a teacher to her students, and more than a friend. She has been taken into their hearts and is considered family. Her reputation is such in the immigrant communities that they tell their friends and relatives to come to her to learn. Just last week two of the students were commended by their work supervisors for great improvement in their spoken English. The students were thrilled, and their confidence increased. B.J. is the wonderful English teacher we had hoped for, but what we didn't expect is that to her students, she is so much more.

Brad & Jennifer Frye | Administrator/Children's Programmer | Brad - 23 years & Jennifer - 19 years

I assume it might be unusual (maybe even against the rules?) to submit the name of a couple rather than an individual, but Brad and Jenn Frye are a team, and together they have been representing our public library and serving this community for two decades. Most people in this community are used to seeing Brad and/or Jenn representing the library at the County Fair, health fairs, Christmas on the square, school career day, local festivals, and at just about anything else where the library is able to have a table, a booth, a presence of some kind.

Brad is an idea man - Brad was full of ideas for the new building. He is pushing for a teaching kitchen. He's suggesting we start a library of "things", wants to see us make more of our community garden and is currently helping me plan an outdoor reading space. Brad enjoys helping patrons one on one with their technology questions.

Jennifer handles the programming so expertly and things run so smoothly, that we sometimes forget how wonderful she is. While I think of her as the children's programmer, she actually conducts programs for all ages, including adults.

They have provided counsel, comfort, and encouragement at times for staff members; in at least one case, literally providing a home. I call that going above and beyond, and I nominate them both, because, as I said before, they are a team, and they are able to do so many of the things they do because of that partnership, and their common commitment to the library and the community.

Braden Canon | Programmer | 6 months

We didn't know we needed a teen and pre-teen programmer until Braden became our intern last year. Before we remodeled in 2017, we had a pretty nice sized group of teens and preteens who frequented the library. But after we remodeled & post COVID, we have wondered how to make contact again with this age group. We tried to entice them with electronic games and a 3D printer ...

Braden asked if he could start some groups for teens and preteens as part of his time here as an intern. We worried that he would be disappointed at what we assumed would be a lack of turn-out. We were so wrong! He started with a Dungeons and Dragons group. Now there are two groups. His wife has joined the fun and while Braden leads one, she is in charge of the second group. He often dresses the part, and I'm sure that adds to the attraction.

When he graduated, we hired him immediately. Since then, he has added a Lego Club. Then a Retro-Games Club. And we know he has more ideas just waiting to be used.

Brenna Taitano | Technical Services Assistant | 1 year & 5 months

With Brenna primarily working in the back, a lot of her work goes unseen by our community, but her impact is felt throughout the library/community. She is responsible for cataloging our physical materials, updating our holdings in the physical and digital space, repairing our damaged items, statistic keeping and other crucial duties. Her work in our library is crucial to us getting resources to patrons.

Britney Netherton | Access Services Supervisor | 9 months

Britney brings such a caring attitude to the team and during the InfoExpress changes she had started at our library. She kept everyone in the loop and made sure that our power users knew the updates as well.

Burl Cooper | Library Assistant | 23 years

Burl brings a calming presence and thoughtful insight to his job as a Library Assistant. His 2+ decades of service enable him to share invaluable perspective and experience with his colleagues and with the public. So many of our patrons know Burl from interacting with him at the library, and nearly all of them consider him a friend because of his kindness. If an agitated patron needs help at the library, and Burl is on desk, they make a beeline straight for him. He brings this same energy to interacting with our new staff members, providing them with a feeling of ease and support as they are learning the ropes. Whenever there is an opening on a committee, managers will nearly always reach out to ask that Burl join the team because he is thoughtful yet practical when considering new or changing processes. After 23 years of working at the library, Burl continues to embrace change by learning new technologies or processes or by taking on new roles.

Cindy Guerrero | Children/Teen Staff | 1.5 years

Cindy has elevated our C/T programming by encouraging children and teens to find fun in everything they do. From her immersive programs such as "Mad Tea Party," an Alice in Wonderland-themed program that provided fun learning opportunities for people with all abilities, to a life-sized game of Candy Land, Cindy gives 110% to all that she does.

She has championed inclusion in our community by creating programs that have many activities that participants may opt-in or opt-out. This is especially helpful for children with varying abilities.

Cindy has also been instrumental in developing our Spanish collection and championing a bilingual culture at our public library.

Claire Wilson | Inter-library Loan Specialist | 4.5 years

Claire is a wonderful asset to our library. She puts people at ease with her gentle and helpful attitude. Claire greets every single person that comes into the library with a smile and a hello. She will stop whatever she is doing to make sure the patron's needs come first.

She has taken on extra responsibility as she is in charge of interlibrary loan materials.

Claire is happy to help in any area of the library, not just the area she typically works in and she is able to help with any customer need in the computer lab. She is always happy to learn a new skill, and is a fast learner, too. She chips in where help is needed, whether that is with cleaning the tables, shifting books, or any other task that comes up unexpectedly.

Claire is a great team player. She helps train new staff members and encourages them. She is also a member of the committee that helps celebrate birthdays and other important milestones in the lives of our staff.

Claire is a very eager learner. Whenever there is a chance for her to broaden her library knowledge, she takes advantage of it. She has been to the ILF Regional conference multiple times and also to Digipalooza. She takes what she has learned from those conferences and applies it to her everyday tasks back at the library. She is a treasured employee at our public library!

Deborah Winders | Administrator of Tech Services | 38 years

Longevity! Debbie's entire 38-year career has been devoted to our public library. That alone has been an inspiration to many of our staff: that they too can make a life-long career of working here.

In the 1980's when the library was feeling the need to grow, Debbie was tasked with finding property the library could buy to build a new library. She was instrumental in obtaining our current building.

She has been the administrator over our reference staff for many years. She takes the minutes at our board meetings, reminding us when the board needs to make a motion, or take a vote. She has been here long enough to know our history and to know library policy very well.

She offers her opinions when asked, but if a decision is made that goes contrary to her suggestion, she accepts what was decided and acts on it without any further comment. She is unfailingly punctual and reliable.

And most of all, she loves cataloging.... which is not everyone's favorite thing to do, but she excels at it.

Hannah Perin (co winner) | Programmer | 6 years

Hannah is our rebel librarian, our crusader, our woman on a mission to right wrongs, to stand strong with the weak, always looking to find a way to meet needs when she sees them. I can think of so many examples of this.

Hannah goes to conferences whenever she can and always comes back with lots of ideas to implement. One was to create a Story Walk on a walking trail here in the county. Hannah not only carried out this project, but, fearing that local children did not see enough diversity in the children they attend school with, she purposely chooses books that show diversity in the children pictured.

After hearing patrons ask where they could find a notary public in town, she took the training and became a notary. She provides the service without charge to patrons who ask for one now.

We have been providing a free tax service here for years, in conjunction with the IRS, United Way, etc., as many other libraries do, but when our coordinator retired a few years ago, we had trouble finding a replacement. Hannah urged her husband, who has a degree in this area, to take the reins and keep the program going. He has been our coordinator for the last two years, so we did not lose this valuable community service thanks to her urging him to step forward.

The book club she leads is maybe the noisiest book club in the whole library world. These ladies have so much fun. They are a feisty, opinionated, hilarious group, and I know Hannah's own personality has a lot to do with that.

The children's books that she reads on our Facebook page are always so well done, with her own brand of humor making them a lot of fun to watch.

Hannah is a rebel librarian, a crusader, and woman on a mission.

Jamie Holsapple | Adult Education Coordinator | 8 years

Jamie was hired to be an adult circulation clerk in 2016. She had no prior library experience, but she quickly acquainted herself with every aspect of the job and excelled at customer service. She was constantly busy as she always saw one more thing that could be done that was helpful to the patrons or the staff.

We hired Jamie just before we started a renovation and building addition project. We handled the construction work in phases so that we could keep the library open. This required moving every single item in the library: books, furniture, pretty much everything, 3-5 times during the course of the project. Rather than scaring off our new employee, Jamie was in the thick of it, one of our most dependable "muscles", moving, organizing, and setting up new areas from which to operate.

When our Adult Education coordinator moved out of state, we offered Jamie the challenge of taking on this position. Our Adult Education Center offers exam preparation for the GED and training on specific job skills and several certification courses. They also offer classes on soft skills such as problem solving and collaboration skills. A few years ago, we also started English Language Learning classes for adults and families. Jamie is in charge of coordinating all these classes, the teachers, the schedules, the testing, the graduation ceremonies, as well as funding, fund-raising, and budgeting for all these endeavors.

We are all inspired by her work ethic, her willingness to take on big responsibilities, the grace and humility with which she handles whatever job she takes on. And most of all, we are inspired by her determination to make a real difference in the lives of her students, the confidence she has gained during her time here, and just her all around caring, open, determined, but always fun personality. She is a gem, and we are so lucky to have found her.

Jessica Utley | Professional Assistant/Reference | 11 years

Jessica came to us with a great deal of talent, a mind that thrives on detail, and interesting life experiences. Jessica has a talent for languages. She speaks, reads, and writes both Spanish and Russian. She has lived in Belize, Central America in the past.

Her attention to detail has led us to tighten up the language of every policy we have in the library. She offers very thorough assistance to our patrons, instructing as she assists, explaining in terms that are almost impossible to misinterpret.

One of the best things she has done for our patrons involves offering downloadable audiobooks to our patrons. All was going well till RB Digital went out of business. We lost over a thousand books we had purchased. Jessica dived in again, looking for answers, and Overdrive was the answer. She was very persistent and determined to continue to supply this very real need in our community.

More recently her attention has turned to our reference department. With an inventory and a huge weeding project, she has thrown herself into this project with her usual focus. I feel confident we will have one of the finest reference departments available anywhere when she is finished.

Jessica is very intent on self-educating on a wide variety of library topics. She has spent a great deal of time studying internet safety and has tightened up some of our security policies.

Jessica pushes us all further than we would have gone at times to do the best job that we can do.

Meghan Kauffman | Youth Services Clerk & Meeting Room Coordinator | 2 years

Meghan truly is remarkable in her support for all staff and patrons. She exemplifies what it means to think of others more than self. She is the wonderful combination of constant and reliable along with being creative and resourceful. Meghan organizes the monthly subscription boxes for the teens by creating the monthly theme. This is very well-received and exciting. Meghan makes the teens feel special by all she puts into these boxes. Meghan also creates craft kits during the year for the Youth Services dept. There is nothing Meghan won't do to help the staff. Whether asked to help put together a cabinet, the Story Walk slides, move furniture, clean the critters cages and more, she does it willingly and never needs supervision or reminded.

Meghan recently took on the task of meeting room coordinator. She willingly learned all about the meeting room software, while also organizing information and training the staff on how to use it. This is a big responsibility and she has rocked it.

My thoughts about Meghan is that my job would be so much harder if she wasn't here. I really don't know what I would do without Meghan. She is a huge support! Her gentle-quiet spirit and desire to do 110% at her job has made her a huge asset to our library. She makes everyone's day easier because she does so much and never asks for recognition; she just does things because she enjoys helping others. If every library had a Meghan, the library world would be a better place.

Missy Holmes | Youth Services Assistant | 2 1/2 years

Missy is so enthusiastic about high quality and fun youth education! She brings such energy and enthusiasm to our youth department and our community. She is a homeschool mom of 3 children (her oldest is a successful student in college at USI), and is involved in teaching in her homeschool cooperative. In our community, she helps coordinate her church youth Sunday School classes and is a 4-H Hippology instructor in our local Purdue Extension 4-H program. She is such a valuable team member in my department, and one of her biggest strengths is brainstorming quality programs, which she calls "The next fun thing" that we offer our community. She's a dreamer, a researcher, and a hard worker. She is inspiring to me, and she makes a big difference in many areas of our county.

Nikota Brault | Head Clerk, Youth Services | 14 years

Our Nikota is a go-getter! She works at another job early in the morning before she makes the 30-minute drive to work at the library for 7-8 hours per day.

She is our one-woman "Fun Committee". Throughout the year she inspires staff morale with all kinds of fun. For Christmas we draw names for Secret Santa's and plans for a catered holiday dinner. We make our own Valentines' bags so we can drop encouraging notes in each other's bags. We have our own grown-up Easter egg hunt and pizza day during National Library week, which is also a day to wear pajamas. We usually have a pitch-in soup week sometime in the winter, and/or a hot chocolate bar.

A few years ago, to increase patron interest in the Adobe Suite that we offer in our tech room, she started a movie contest. One year she committed to joining the state's Rosie committee for children's books. I remember that with all her other work and projects, she was trying to read stacks of books by a deadline.

She works well with children, is just "cool" enough to be able to deal with teens, and she possesses that perfect mix of tolerance for teen goofiness and yet a "don't think you're going to get away with what I already know you're thinking of doing" attitude at the same time. She is also really good at reader's advisory, especially for young adults.

And finally, she has really become a wonderful trainer for pages and new clerks. She creates training projects and quizzes, all personalized to the new-hire's own knowledge, experience, and what they will be expected to do. This has been a huge help to the department. She is very thorough, patient, and persistent; a really talented trainer.

Nikota has continued to take library education classes over the years to increase her value to the library and increase her opportunities on staff here. And she truly is very valued and appreciated for all the things she does and the various ways she inspires us.

Ray Zakrzewski | Library Page | 6 years

Little did we know, when we hired him in 2018, what a great asset Ray would be to our library. He brings care and thoughtfulness to his work as a Page, always considering how his work, and any changes to the collection, will affect our patrons' library use. Before construction commenced at our library last year, Ray inventoried the entire adult fiction and non-fiction collections. As construction began, Ray moved one whole collection after another to allow for painting and HVAC projects. Ray moved the entire Children's Department and Young Adult collections to another floor, and when the adult paperback collection was moved, Ray was the one we called upon to handle the project. Noting the disparity in fitting this collection into another space, Ray added additional shelves to the new area to accommodate the collection. He then moved all of the paperbacks again, adding tension rods behind the items to hold them in place. Each collection move was accompanied by numerous recalibrations, as we weeded and shifted to adjust for each new space, and Ray was the one we could always trust to put things back into place-- repeatedly-- quickly and correctly. Throughout our construction project, literally tens of thousands of items have been moved (once or more) by Ray. Thankfully, his endless patience, sound judgment, and dry humor were a tonic to all throughout these hectic times.

All of these collection-shifting duties took place in addition to Ray's regular paging duties, which he did with a flashlight during phases of construction when we had no power. Also, Ray is always willing to stay past his appointed quitting time and assist with special projects.

Ray works wonderfully independently, and assists all the managers by bringing them any items requiring attention. His observations about the collection and the way it is shelved and displayed are highly valued by staff. Also, we call Ray the 'Book Whisperer' for his ability to find missing items overlooked by other seekers.

Scott Winders (co winner) | Bookmobile driver/Handyman/Project manager | 12 years

Our public library had, for many years, considered building a branch library somewhere in the county. They explored the idea of a Bookmobile and purchased the Bookmobile that we have now and hired Scott as our Bookmobile driver. Scott has proven to be an excellent choice.

He has scheduled regular weekly stops at all the main towns in our county: to the towns that are the farthest north, south, east and west and several in between. He visits the local schools as requested, as well as private schools, day cares, senior centers, nursing homes, and Sweet Owen which employs all handicapped workers. Scott is very insistent on avoiding any interruptions to his schedule, as he knows that being dependable is one of the best ways to ensure that the patrons will visit the bookmobile. He also represents the library at all the festivals throughout the county, and the opening and closing days of the Farmer's Market. The bookmobile is a common and quickly recognizable sight in our county and Scott and the Bookmobile represents the library well.

When I first met Scott, I wondered how well this big man, who is ex-military, with a powerful voice would work with children. I was curious when I saw the posters of book jackets he had chosen to display on the Bookmobile walls, such as: Monsters Eat Whiny Children. But when I saw the children running to get on the bus, holding up their books and calling out "look Mr. Scott, look at my book!" and crowding around him, I had no fears, the children love him, and they get his humor.

Scott has extensive history and experience in building trades, and the library was in need of a handy man. So, we put him to work doing many repairs around the library and he continues taking care of such things to this day. We always seem to have a running list for him, and he takes care of each item on the list as he has time between routes and preparation for his stops. Thankfully, he was able to build his routes back up again after the pandemic, and this year he had the highest door count he has ever had.

When we were given a large donation for the purpose of building an open-air pavilion on the library property. We put Scott in charge as manager of the project and agreed to respect his decisions.

We appreciate how dedicated Scott is to serving this community and how well he represents the library. And we appreciate how willing he is to do the many jobs we request of him.

Valerie Garcia | Reference Assistant | 15 years

Valerie goes above and beyond to help the patrons at our public library. She is always willing to lend a helping hand and volunteer for events that the library holds. For example when we have our Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month events, Valerie will always work to help serve food or lead an activity for families to enjoy. She will even bake items for people who may be celebrating a birthday within the staff members just so they will have an even better birthday. She has always been flexible and open to change shifts so that a coworker can have a day they need off or if they need to work earlier or later. She is the person in charge of the crafts program and the patrons love her so much because she is always kind and helpful and patient. She knows all the front line departments and covers departments without a second thought.