Service is Our Middle Name



Ellen Tomlinson

Ellen Tomlinson, retiring director of Clearwater Memorial Public Library, is holding a book about guns that was recently replaced for the third time, because the book is so popular. This has led to the book being moved to reference, which means patrons can no longer check it out. They can, however, come in and look at it all day.

By Andrea Dell

Every so often, you meet someone who is so passionate about something, you can't help but get swept up as you listen to them talk about it.

Such was the case last week when I interviewed Ellen Tomlinson, current Director of Clearwater Memorial Public Library in Orofino.

Just a few minutes into the interview, her love of and pride in the library was obvious. "I could probably talk for 12 days just about the library and the stuff they're doing," she remarked at one point.

Ellen has been the Orofino library's director since August of 2009. Her last day as its director is Feb. 29. I'm sure many will be sad to see her go.

"The reason I'm retiring is not because I don't love the library," she explained.

Ellen's reason for retiring is probably not what you'd expect. "It's just time, I think, for new blood, and new people with new ideas," she says. "I have looked back at previous directors, and everybody brings something."

Ellen and her husband, Norm, moved to Clearwater County in the early 1970s. They were fresh out of college from the University of Idaho in Moscow. Norm was employed by Potlatch (and later, C-PTPA), so they first ended up in Headquarters. After that, it was Pierce.

Ellen taught kindergarten and pre-school. Not long after moving to Headquarters, she began driving all the way to Orofino to visit its library. By 1977, she and Norm had moved to Orofino, and Ellen continued teaching kindergarten and pre-school. Her sons, Jonathan and Benjamin, were born in Orofino, and attended Orofino schools. Jonathan now works for Boeing, and Benjamin is an architect.

The first person Ellen met in Orofino was Ginger Rowland (who, 40 years later, is still involved in the library, and has seen 16 directors come and go).

Ellen applied for a position at the library in 2002, after retiring from teaching. “I’ve always wanted to work in the library. I love books. I was a voracious reader, so I had a knowledge of books,” Ellen says. She described working at the library as one of her “dream jobs.”

She began as a substitute, and hadn’t been there long when the library lost several staff members. At that point she was asked to join the staff as a library assistant. It wasn’t long before she was named the children’s librarian. Given her career in teaching, it was a natural fit.

Chris Ashby was the library’s director at that time. After Ellen became children’s librarian, he appointed her assistant director. When he got close to retirement in 2009, he approached her and asked her to be the next director.

Ellen’s response? “I’ll have to think about it.” That same year, she accepted the position.

Changes

Ellen has witnessed a lot of change within the library since first joining.

When she started, “cubbies” for the computers had just been added. The library had only three computers, initially. Since then, the number of computers has tripled (as has the number of people coming into the library).

In 2002, computers were common in businesses and offices, but not everyone had

one in their home. Nowadays, almost everyone has a computer—if you have a smartphone, you have a computer.

This inspired one of the library's most popular offerings: Free public Wi-Fi. Even people who don't have a library card can go to the library and hook up to the Wi-Fi with their own device.

"We're indiscriminate. We want people to use it, because we got it through a grant, and we want to share our good fortune," Ellen says.

The Wi-Fi is so popular that you can drive by the library at some pretty strange hours and see people standing around using the library's WiFi, which is on 24/7.

"Sometimes they're just sitting out in their car, with the car running and the movie streaming," she says.

If you don't have a smartphone, tablet, or laptop, the library's computers are available.

More than books

Clearwater Memorial Public Library is in a district. This means you don't have to live within Orofino city limits to be a patron.

You do have to live in Clearwater County, and if you do, you are considered a library patron, and can obtain a library card. The first one is free, and if you ever need a replacement, they are just $1.

The library is funded by patrons, so library staff work to give back, and to make coming to the library a joy for patrons.

Patrons get access to a whole host of services. I could fill up a whole newspaper page describing everything. Here are a few of the highlights:

In addition to books—and plenty of them—Orofino's library has DVDs, newspapers, magazines, one on one computer and device classes, audio books, children's and young adults' sections, and so much more.

They even "purge" books that haven't been checked out in three years, and leave them in the foyer for anyone who wants them.

Library patrons may use the library's Ancestry.com account, free. You do have to be using the library's Wi-Fi in order to access it, but you can do on your own device.

Library computers are available for an hour at a time. These computers "clear" at the end of every day, so that anything you typed will be erased. They also have profanity filters in place, as required by state law.

The library offers a free online book check-out service called Overdrive. You can check a book out online and keep it for three weeks, stored on your device or computer. (It self-deletes after three weeks.)

Because the library is part of VALNet, you also have access to 49 other libraries. If Orofino's library doesn't have something you want, odds are one of the others do, and you can have it delivered to Orofino in a week or less. You can also check a book out at one VALNet library, and drop it off at another when you're done with it.

You may recall hearing about the summer reading program. Under Ellen's guidance it's become enormously popular, with anywhere from 80 to 150 children enjoying it each summer. There's an adult version, too.

If you need to take an online test, the library can set you up somewhere quiet. And if you're taking online classes, the library can proctor for you. Again, it's free.

Patrons and visitors

Ellen shared several entertaining anecdotes about experiences with patrons and visitors, and even stories about Orofino's rampant deer population.

She says she'll often talk to members of community groups about the library, and inevitably someone ends up asking, "The library does that?" It's a common refrain from patrons, too.

Summertime brings a lot of visitors from other countries, because they know they can check their email. Ellen mentioned a French couple who visits Orofino, because he likes to fish and she likes to hike. A lot of Swedes show up as well.

Ellen says these visitors have learned that the U.S. has a lot of free, public WiFi, and that one of the first places to look is the library.

She told me that someone will come in and tell library staff that there's a book they just love, and it's their favorite, and they'd like to read it. But, they can't remember the title or the characters' names.

Staff are often able to figure out which book is sought, by asking about the plot, and for other details. Occasionally they will hand the "favorite" book to the patron who requested it, and the person still doesn't recognize it, until they open it and read a page or two.

The local deer may be smarter than we give them credit for. Ellen tells her staff to ignore the flowers they plant, and also not to carry any around. She says if the deer see someone bending down to smell the flowers, or see someone carrying them around, they figure out something tasty is there.

Ellen orders new books every week, and about 20 percent of these are replacements. "We all know that water and books are not a good combination," she says, "but we often find that they meet. Not in a good way."

Books being chewed up by animals is another common cause of destruction. Books will be left on the floor or someplace low, and when they're found again, there might be some damage to the corners, or half the book might be eaten.

Lost and misplaced books aren't uncommon. Ellen says library staff try to give people an opportunity to locate the book, especially during the summer. Oftentimes people have left the book in their camper. Sometimes it ends up in places like the children's toy box, or under the bed.

The library's future

Library staff are constantly looking for ways to improve and add to the library's services. They welcome suggestions from patrons.

"We love our patrons. We want them to enjoy and feel that their library is a vital, changing, friendly, happy atmosphere," Ellen explained. "I want the library to be a place that people say, 'Let's just go to the library! They'll know.'"

Her first year she was children's librarian, she was standing at the circulation desk. It was near closing time. A gentleman walked by with his child, who was probably about eight.

Ellen says this man “just turned to me and said, ‘what are all the continents?’ He wanted the names of all the continents.”

She rattled through the ones she could remember, and the man said, “Antarctica! That’s the one we forgot!” Then, he turned to his child and said, “And so that’s why we come to the library.” And Ellen thought, “Hoo-rah!”

In the future, Ellen sees the library “as being more of a community center,” a social hub. She added that, because people today are used to getting instant answers (thanks to information readily available online), library staff will need to adapt to provide answers this way.

Several imminent changes are in the works, too. The library has acquired the two houses next to it, and plans to absorb the nearest one to provide more body space. Ellen told me that, at last year’s summer reading party, 160 people managed to cram into the library.

The house of the two that is farther away from the library will be torn down to make room for more parking.

The VALNet Board of Directors recently decided to add the music programming called Freegal. I checked it out at freegal.com, and it seems Freegal streams movies as well.

Library patrons will be able to download a few songs once a week, as well as stream music. Because Orofino’s library is part of VALNet, patrons will soon get to enjoy this benefit, for free.

Help from the community

Friends of the Library has been an enormous help, Ellen says. They hold fundraisers every year, and have used funds from those to: put up the library’s landscaping; have the tree in the library’s front lawn removed; buy the library a new copy machine; and even get some new windows put in. All this has saved thousands of dollars of the library’s budget.

Ellen spoke very highly of the Friends during our interview; and about the generosity of Orofino in general. The library sends out letters looking for summer reading sponsors, and Orofino never fails to deliver. It was clear she loves living here, and loves the people.

And she’s confident that her replacement, whoever it is, will do a fantastic job. “I just know that the next person is going to be great, too,” she says.

In her retirement, Ellen looks forward to spontaneity. Gardening, and reading until her eyes bleed, are two of her favorite pastimes, and she is excited to do more of both. (As library director, most of the reading she does is book reviews.)

The library is hosting a farewell party for Ellen next Friday, Feb. 26, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Stop in and wish her all the best, and thank her for all she has helped bring to Clearwater Memorial Public Library.

Lastly, no matter where you live, drop by your local library and see what they have to offer. Odds are they’ve got something going on that will make your day.

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