

BEST SMALL LIBRARY IN AMERICA 2016

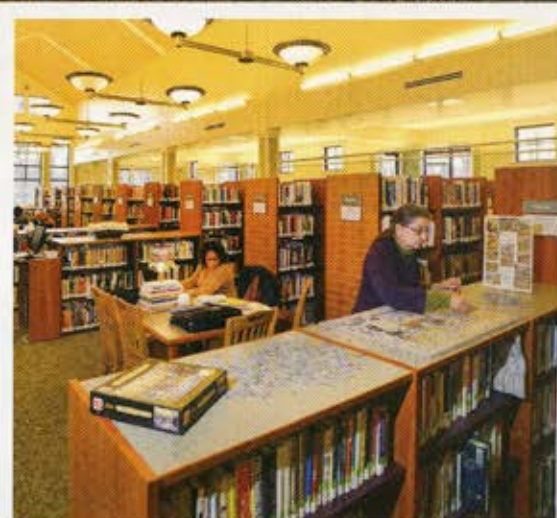
# LIBRARY JOURNAL®

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**Albert Wisner Public Library**  
Warwick, NY



After decades of low funding and an inadequate facility, in 2007 the citizens of Warwick, NY, voted to approve an \$8.5 million bond issue to build a new library. Their new Albert Wisner Public Library (AWPL), completed a short six years ago, has been totally reborn.

And not just the library itself: through careful planning, engaged public input, and the creative acquisition and introduction of technology and social media, AWPL has transformed its community as well. It has modernized both library service and life in Warwick and the district. (AWPL is a district library serving the 23,647 residents of Warwick and the Deer Trail School District, which is in its jurisdiction.)

The revived AWPL built on the library's beloved traditional role while establishing new standards for innovation and creativity. The resulting vibrant, high-impact community center welcomes and inspires residents of all ages on a daily basis. "Loyal library patrons...enjoy the larger but still homey facility that boasts state-of-the-art green technology, a collection...double in size, and something else: the first public cultural center in our town," says Donna Applegate, president of the AWPL board.



# CULTURE CONVENER

Once quaint, the **Albert Wisner Public Library** galvanized support for a new library that narrows the digital divide and powers a roster of nonstop programs *By John N. Berry III*

AWPL has become the benchmark for library service in the lower Hudson Valley and stands as a model of what a small 21st-century library should be: a perfect choice as *LJ* Best Small Library in America, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The award was founded a dozen years ago to encourage and showcase the exemplary work of the U.S. public library that most profoundly demonstrates outstanding service to populations of 25,000 or less.

## Getting started

"The new building opened in 2009. The drive for the bond issue to build it, like most new library campaigns, went on for years, if not decades," says AWPL director Rosemary Cooper. Cooper was hired in 2001 to launch another campaign for the new library after voters had rejected the idea in 1996.

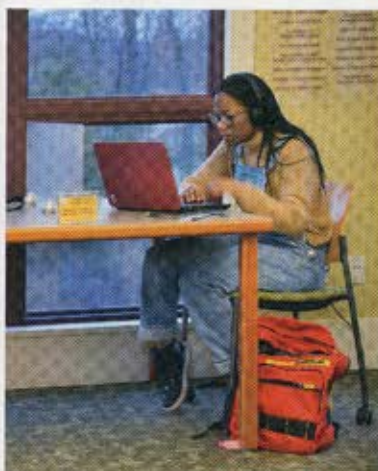
She had been in a series of administrative posts that had taken her to bigger and bigger libraries. Says Cooper, "Initially I was pretty daunted.... Warwick is uniquely sheltered from development and malls by these two hills we call mountains.... It is pristine and quaint.... I had to decide if I could get the library and the community to jump from the 19th century to the 21st century. At first I thought, 'No. I can't do this.' How can

I make that difference in a town that doesn't see any problem?" Cooper says. So far, she has stayed for 15 years.

Applegate joined the board at the same time Cooper was hired. Together with other members of the board of seven trustees and the AWPL Friends of the Library, they worked to get out the vote, start a foundation, and begin to campaign in earnest for the bond issue. They were successful and "got out" more lasting support in the process. "The Friends group has quadrupled in active members over the past five years," writes Colleen Larsen, president of the AWPL Friends of the Library.

## Technology matters

Because access to and instruction in technology is an integral part of a 21st-century library, AWPL provides continuous access to high-speed Internet and free Wi-Fi, significantly reducing the digital divide in Warwick. AWPL has the central role as provider and facilitator of current technology and digital content to all residents. The library emphasizes technology support for its growing senior population, from one-on-one instruction to a variety of group classes on a wide array of hardware and software topics. Support for use of digital devices is ubiquitous at AWPL and includes individualized help with multiple devices, platforms, and content; digital open houses; and a robust schedule of computer classes. AWPL has one of the largest and most heavily used collections of digital content in the Ramapo Catskill Library System



**A COMMUNITY EFFORT** (Standing, l.-r.): Rosemary Cooper, AWPL director; Michael Newhard, mayor, Village of Warwick; Michael Johndrow, executive director, Warwick Valley Chamber of Commerce; Michael Sweeten, Warwick town supervisor; Jennifer O'Connor, editor in chief, *Warwick Valley Dispatch*; M. Chris Fox, trustee, Moffat PL; Tom Roberts, owner, Ye Olde Warwick Book Shoppe; Richard Hull, Warwick municipal historian; Cathryn Anders, trustee and archivist, Warwick Historical Society; Mary Makofske, Sustainable Warwick; Glenn P. Dickes, treasurer, AWPL Foundation. (Seated

on bench, l.-r.): David Leach, superintendent, Warwick Valley Central School Dist.; Donna Applegate, president, AWPL Board of Trustees, and president, AWPL Foundation; Robert Hubsher, executive director, Ramapo Catskill Lib. Syst.; Susan D. Dickes, AWPL Foundation. (Foreground, l.-r.): Susan Supak, volunteer; Bethany Negersmith, principal, St. Stephen-St. Edward School.

(Clockwise, this page, from top l.): Patrons getting their computer on; library assistant Kate Eicher (standing, l.) introduces visiting kids to the children's area; local artists admire their handiwork in a revolving showcase; the original building represented on the library's history wall, created by local artist Marion Grebow; members of the senior improv group Acting for a Change; a student finds a quiet place to study

## Locally grown

AWPL continually seeks ways to increase access by adding new vendors, such as hoopla. But the library doesn't just rely on vendor-provided content. AWPL, in partnership with the Village of Warwick and Walling Road Technologies, rebuilt and now moderates a popular electronic community bulletin board, Warwick CommonPlace, where residents communicate on topics ranging from community issues and events to a simple exchange of services and goods.

AWPL staff also developed the regionally acclaimed Warwick Heritage Database to provide access to full-text, local historical newspapers and other related material such as local ebooks, maps, and podcasts.

## Thousands of programs

Before the library reboot, Warwick had no cultural center or theater. Now, AWPL is the town's center for low-cost or free entertainment and activities. In the last fiscal year, nearly 20,000 people attended one of 1,379 programs at AWPL. Overall, AWPL recorded 183,007 physical visits, with another 132,282 online.

Realizing how people relied on AWPL and its high-quality programming, the board more than doubled the budget for programs in 2015. (Voters weigh in on the budget every year, usually increasing it a bit. The total annual budget last fiscal year was \$1,380,391, resulting in per capita support of \$58.37.)

Despite that increase, though, "public demands for in-

(RCLS). AWPL has led efforts in RCLS for user-friendly policies that increase access to shared collections and digital materials. AWPL hosts and often teaches technology workshops for other RCLS members using the library's 12 laptops, Smart Board, projection equipment, and community room.

"The acceptance and growing use of electronic media has culturally changed our world.... Though AWPL maintains a current and desirable collection of printed [works], we have had to improve and continue to grow our electronic media material collections and access to subscription databases," Cooper adds. "A few years ago we heard how technology would make libraries obsolete. We have turned that on its head. Libraries have become the gateway to get access to technology. It has made libraries more necessary."

creased programming have been a daunting and rewarding challenge. Our library has one of the smallest per capita budgets in RCLS yet remains one of the busiest libraries in the system. Every day, patrons flock through the doors to enjoy movies, concerts, lectures, craft groups, and numerous children's activities. No longer just a repository for books, our library has truly become the heart of our community," reports Applegate.

The new programs include Art Matters, which features each month an artist in the library's gallery space; every quarter artists participate in a thematic show. At all events, the artists discuss and sell their work, with a portion of the proceeds benefiting AWPL. The library provides teens in the school's Art Portfolio program with their first public exhibition experience. Last year, AWPL featured an artist in the annual Open Studio Orange County tour.

The Warwick Children's Book Festival is a biennial event first hosted by AWPL in 2005. It features 45–50 children's book authors and illustrators. The program attracts more than 1,000 people and creates strong partnerships among the library, village merchants, and the school district. A local bookseller provides books for sale, with a portion of the proceeds going to the library.

The Warwick Café Reading Project, coordinated quarterly by the AWPL Foundation, the Village of Warwick, and a local bookseller, makes available at participating cafés free copies of a book chosen because of its relation to that season's library programs. The Red Book Shelf Project's red painted bookshelves

are placed in key areas such as senior housing, migrant labor centers, and the local food bank and kept stocked with new titles by AWPL volunteers.

The library hosts a weekly Writer's Group and several book clubs. AWPL has instituted an annual Marble Notebook Project, encouraging writers to create a themed story that is then added to the collection and available for checkout.

The AWPL Foundation's sold-out Music from McFarland Drive concert series presents a variety of year-round musical performances. AWPL was one of the first venues in the country to host Reading and Writing with Anne Frank, a traveling exhibit from the Anne Frank Center USA. The library also presented additional programs that engendered discussions on issues related to intolerance and discrimination and how they affect the local community. Acting for a Change Senior Improv Acting Group meets weekly for workshops with a certified improv director. The group develops and presents an original play and provides the area's growing senior population with opportunities to stay active and learn new skills. Friday Fun Nights, AWPL's quarterly, intergenerational family programming nights keep the library open late to allow for more participation by working parents. The AWPL Career Transition Program recently received special recognition from the New York State legislature. Targeted to the needs of job seekers and facilitated by a professional career consultant, the Career Transition Program includes job coaching, interview skills, and résumé review. Alzheimer's Association Musical Social Group features classes led by a music therapist focusing on relaxation for Alzheimer's patients and their families.

Many successful AWPL programs have been replicated in other libraries, including Career Transition and the book festival. What started as AWPL's Teen Battle of the Books is now a regional annual event that includes all libraries in RCLS.

"Someone told me that it was nice to see the library becoming something different in our role as a meeting place. I replied that it seems sort of different, but really the library, including AWPL, has been doing that for a long time," Cooper asserts.

## Fostering partnerships

A high priority for AWPL is meeting the needs of Warwick residents through partnerships with local organizations, actively developing ways to provide local groups with customized support. In addition to offering space, the library encourages partners to use its online registration system as well as its marketing expertise to assist in promoting their events.

With AWPL support, organizations have increased their stability and expanded their reach while exposing the community to new ideas. AWPL also participates in developing many of the programs of these organizations by providing invaluable feedback, guidance, and liaisons. Successful ongoing relationships with Family Central, Warwick Valley Seniors, the Warwick Valley Gardeners, Warwick Arts League, Sustainable Warwick, Warwick Historical Society, Warwick Valley Community Center, Warwick Valley Central School District (WVCSD), and St. Stephens/St. Edward's School have supplied new opportunities for joint events. Recent examples include a TED Talk on Farm-to-Table Agriculture; an environmental film discussion series; Monday Afternoon at the Movies for Seniors film series and chats; a biennial Pre-School Fair; parenting education and support seminars; a local school's "Warwick Lives Project"; and "One Student, One Library

## About the Best Small Library in America Award

LJ's annual award, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was created in 2005 to encourage and showcase the exemplary work of libraries serving populations under 25,000.

The winning library receives a \$20,000 cash prize from the Gates Foundation, along with conference costs for two library representatives to attend the Public Library Association (PLA) biennial conference in 2016 in Denver. The two finalist libraries will each receive a \$10,000 cash award, conference costs for two library representatives to attend the 2016 PLA meeting and award celebration, and more.

**JUDGES** LJ thanks the following library professionals who volunteered their time to help select this year's winner:

**GALE BACON** Director, Belgrade Community Library, MT; LJ Best Small Library in America 2015

**SCOTT BONNER** Director, Ferguson Municipal Public Library, MO; Gale/LJ Library of the Year 2015

**DONNA BRICE** Director, Eastern Lancaster County Library, New Holland, PA; President, Association of Rural and Small Libraries

**LEAH JOHNSON** Program Coordinator | Global Development Global Libraries Program, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

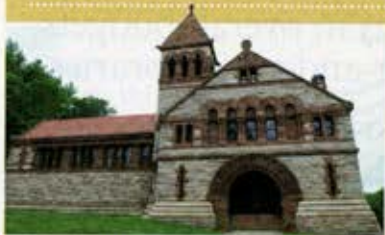
**LARRY NEAL** Director, Clinton-Macomb Public Library, Clinton Township, MI; Immediate Past President, Public Library Association

The panel also includes LJ editors John N. Berry III, Matt Enis, Rebecca T. Miller, Lisa Peet, and Meredith Schwartz.

For guidelines for the 2017 nomination, contact Meredith Schwartz at [m Schwartz@mediasourceinc.com](mailto:m Schwartz@mediasourceinc.com); 646-380-0745; or go to [lj.libraryjournal.com/awards](http://lj.libraryjournal.com/awards)

## Best Small Library in America 2016 Finalists

This year's finalists, chosen from among a numerous and strong array of nominees, share a focus on innovative programs and collaborations to deliver exceptional service with limited resources.



### AMES FREE LIBRARY EASTON, MA

Uma Hiremath,  
Executive Director

Ames Free Library uses limited resources to spur creative thinking. Aging OPAC stations were replaced with small,

affordable Raspberry Pi devices. The library repurposed an adjoining 19th-century mansion into a learning commons funded by a Community Innovation Challenge Grant from the governor—the first to be awarded to a library. Town funds wouldn't cover staff for both buildings, so camera surveillance allows one-person management with more than 2,000 hours worth of help from tech-savvy volunteers. Lack of funds to furnish the third floor led to turning the space into a retreat for authors in residence.

The library reconceptualized adult programming as reference services, tapping the community for expertise and presenting 643 programs in 2015—up from three in 1999!—for less than \$2,000. Program attendance grew 23 percent in five years, to 10,767 people at 694 programs.

The library holds fewer than 70,000 items for its population of 23,000, half of them cardholders. Nonetheless, circulation grew 77 percent over the last five years to 184,000. The library saw about 120,000 in-person visits.

This doing a lot with a little has engendered increased local support as well as state and grant funding. "The can-do ethos...has led to a surprising [growth] in funding by the Town of Easton that has traditionally given only the minimum legally mandated," according to Shelley Quezada, consultant, Library Services to the Unserved. Today, the library's per capita budget is about \$49, 40 percent of which comes from state and town appropriations.



### DADE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY TRENTON, GA

Marshana Sharp,  
Branch Manager

Dade County Public Library (DCPL) serves as a test site for innovative library services that

later roll out to surrounding communities, from ChromeBoxes and preloaded circulating Kindles to the ambitious Prime Time Preschool pilot project, which targeted at-risk, low-income families—most first-time library users—and paid to bring them to the library weekly for family programming. The Georgia Public Library Service trained DCPL staff for the program, and the library became a state model.

The library also conducts literal outreach to its surroundings, investing in outdoor improvements to bridge the area between the library and a local park, including an extended Wi-Fi network and outdoor sound system. Working

with community organizations, the library has cosponsored regular programming in the park and added outdoor games for use in the park. (For patrons who want to do their own outdoor expansion, the library's Maker space features software on garden planning.) The library noticed that many local parents used the park as a safe, neutral zone to transfer children from one parent to another in shared-custody situations. To engage children's interest while parents communicated during that time, the library worked with a volunteer to install an outdoor music center made from recycled materials and plans more centers in the future. Inside the library, six Discovery Centers are set up on a rotating basis and available for checkout to teachers.

The library's success is measured by an influx of new patrons—more than 1,000 in the past two years—and contributions. In 2011, a tornado hit Dade County, and the storm's impact resulted in budget cuts to the library in 2013 and 2014. Yet rather than see the library reduce hours, "donations came pouring in, raising \$52,777 over a period of two years, until government funding could be restored."

AMES PHOTO BY JAMES THOMAS; DADE COUNTY PHOTO ©2015 HOLT WEBB

Card" campaigns. The school/library partnership has been further strengthened by AWPL's participation in WVCSD's Community Partners program, whereby leaders from local agencies consider ways better to support one another. Special Teacher Cards to facilitate library use by all teachers in the district and participation in the "Envirocation Project: Environmental Education in the WVCSD and Community" recently evolved from these conversations.

"Our name is Sustainable Warwick, and our relationship with AWPL amounts to a *strategic partnership* where we share and support a wide range of ideas revolving around both of those words. We would not have been nearly as successful and effective had it not been for this partnership," writes Sustainable Warwick's Mary Makofske, to demonstrate the importance of working with AWPL.

### Best on a budget

"Since the library moved to its new building nearly six years ago, it has evolved into one of the region's best small libraries. The staff and Board of Trustees stimulated community support, through careful planning and an active effort to foster public

input. The resulting 21st-century library building and the dynamic services and programs have turned AWPL into an innovative hub of community activity. [It] has been able to achieve a level of performance that places it in the top ten within RCLS, while keeping costs per capita and per circulation in the lower tenth," writes Robert Hubscher, executive director of RCLS.

These achievements have won over even once-vehement skeptics. "There are people who questioned the need for the new building, even one of our biggest supporters. During our campaign a handful of letter writers opposed the idea, explaining why the library wasn't needed anymore.... A long time after the library opened, one of the most vocal opponents wrote a retraction in the local paper. Now he is one of our biggest fans. He comes to all of our programs and concerts. He said, 'I made a mistake,'" Cooper reports, chuckling.

The Albert Wisner Public Library has truly earned Best Small Library in America recognition. It is a model library, changing with the times and technology, becoming the cultural core of the community, and partnering with any and all to make community life in Warwick better informed, more entertaining, and enriched for people of all ages. ■