

2013 National Medal Winner Video: Waukegan Public Library

Narration: The National Medal for Museum and Library Services is the nation's highest honor for libraries and museums that are serving their communities in exceptional ways. Waukegan Public Library Executive Director, Richard Lee and community member Diana Alvey traveled to Washington from Waukegan, Illinois to receive the national medal and spoke to IMLS about how the library impacts the community.

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Richard: The Waukegan Public Library has been a public library in Waukegan for 115 years. And we've taken kind of a different tact than what is normally the way that public libraries go. And to us it was decided through what we've heard in the community that we really needed to be a support for education. // Being the nimble organization that we are we got together and repurposed 2200 square feet into an early learning center that primarily got kids ready for kindergarten by whether it was knowing primarily colors, putting things in groups of ten, letter recognition.

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Richard: So it's not just the library with the books but the emphasis is really on reading, and whatever reading is.

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Richard: Population wise we're about 90,000. And it is heavily Latino.

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Richard: Well, about a year ago, I guess, we hired an engagement and outreach person. And her goal was really to // put together this core of ambassadors to go out into the community // and find out what they needed and bring that information back to us.//

And the promotoras was born from that.

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Diana: I have worked as a promotora. The promotora is responsible for going out into the community and advocating on behalf of the library and letting the citizens know what is available in the library. And it starts with the very basics about obtaining a library card, what types of materials are available in a library. Often times the Latino community isn't familiar with libraries, we don't have them in Mexico. // So you have to educate them about the library and to let them know it's a free service and it has a wealth of materials there that are available for any need that they might have. // And then find out from the community what is it that you need? What is it-- what need do you have that isn't being met and what is stopping you from advancing? What is stopping you from progressing here in the community?

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Diana: Is it GED classes? Is it ESL classes? Is it computer literacy classes?

// And then try to find a way to break down that barrier.

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Richard: Well, we took the emphasis off the books a little bit and I did that reluctantly because to me going through library school and everything else you really-- that was your measurement for success by your circulation. And a city of our size I know how many books that they should be circulating and we're nowhere near that. And I'm okay with that because now we found out that we have this other need that we can really reach.

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Richard: And to me we're only successful when our citizens are successful, whatever they want to do, whether they want to get a better job or a job, whether they want to go back and get their GED, whether they want to finish school or whatever it is, we're there to help them.

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Diana: Well, I can speak personally about the impact that it's having in our community by the voices that-- of the citizens that come back to our ESL classes. I know that I have had personal experience with my students coming back and saying "I was able to ask for a raise" or to ask for a promotion at their job because now they are able to communicate better at their job. Or "I was able to attend my first parent/teacher conference." And those students are so proud because they could ask the teachers questions about their own children. // So sometimes it's very basic needs that are being met but they come back and they are just so darn proud of themselves for having accomplished that.

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Richard: And it's been very successful for us and we're setting our sites on the entire community, not just the Latino but African-American and all demographics.

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Richard: I would think the one thing that makes us special is that we are-- I'm going to use that nimble word, again. When we see a need out there or we find a need, the ambassadors bring back something that says, you know, hey this is a need that's in the community that no one else is really addressing here, we really take action. And we do it without any extra funds, really. Our budget's been flat for three years and we find a way to make it happen.