

Volunteers make a difference at libraries

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FULL TEXT

In September 2011, Dan Driscoll, a lifetime Neenah resident, lost his wife of over 50 years. Struggling with loneliness and boredom, he found himself falling into depression. Thankfully, a good friend of his who worked at the public library had a life-changing idea: Dan could become a library volunteer.

What began as an idea from a concerned friend, soon became a valuable partnership for Dan and the library. To date, Dan has donated over 5,000 hours to the Neenah Public Library —the equivalent of 2.5 years of full-time work. Dan has become like family to the staff. His work, from sorting DVDs to watering the garden, has been invaluable. Every contribution from a volunteer, no matter the time, makes a difference in the community.

Library volunteer programs tend to be as different as the libraries themselves. Some libraries utilize volunteers primarily to shelve materials. Other libraries have diversified their volunteer opportunities by encouraging the use of the specialized skills and talents of their volunteer force. In Appleton, volunteers assist with genealogy research and deliver books to homebound patrons. Neenah volunteers distribute meals for the youth summer lunch program. Menasha's volunteers plan and execute their annual book sale. Volunteer opportunities also exist with Friends of the Library organizations. Friends groups often utilize volunteers for fundraising and program planning. As Dan's story demonstrates, people are motivated to volunteer for a variety of reasons. Quite often, library volunteers are retired residents looking for a way to give back in their newly found free time or students fulfilling their required community service hours. But beyond that, we see dedicated people of all ages, some as young as 12, who are willing to spend their free time lending a hand. Their drive simply comes from a pure love of the library. The connection to the mission of the library can be the best motivator.

With all these motivating factors, the levels of library volunteerism here in the Fox Cities is very high. Appleton Public Library sees over 7,700 volunteer hours donated annually, and with 26 active volunteers; Kaukauna received over 1,500 hours of help. But impact goes beyond the numbers. Every time a volunteer delivers books to a homebound patron, assists someone with their employment search, gets that popular book back out to the shelves, or simply gives someone a smile as they walk into the library, they are making a difference.

Having the opportunity to be a library volunteer coordinator and working alongside these amazing people has been the most rewarding experience!

If you're interested in becoming a library volunteer, all you need to do is ask. Getting started with volunteering at your library is likely easier than you think. Most libraries have a similar process —just inquire in person or online, fill out an application, pass a background check, and voilà; you'll be lending your own special talents to the community in no time.

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Amy Molitor

Guest Columnist

DETAILS

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