

I Love My Librarian!

2011 Award

NOMINATION FOR Martha (Marty) Ferriby

Director
Hackley Public Library
Muskegon, Michigan

NOMINATED BY
Friends of Hackley Public
Library Board

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets him/her apart?

Directing Hackley Library in inner-city Muskegon, Michigan, demands a balancing act. Martha (Marty) Ferriby's ability to lead this downtown library in a city experiencing hard times sets her apart. She works with a diverse group of library users: old-timers who grew up in central Muskegon, moved out and became financially successful, but return to patronize the Library; teens doing homework and using computers; small children enjoying story times; unemployed and homeless persons who wait on the front steps for the Library to open. All of these are made to feel equally welcome and can draw on the skills of a staff trained well by Marty, who is highly visible throughout the building.

Marty also balances a respect for the 121-year-old physical structure, which has been a source of pride for Muskegon because of its beautiful architecture and stained-glass windows, with the practical realization that a good library must be modern. Under her directorship, use of technology and awareness of patrons' special needs have increased greatly. She is passionate about the motto engraved in the cornerstone: "The possession of the living, the heritage of posterity." As one Friends Board member wrote, "Marty is the epitome of a good librarian."

2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and made your experience of the library a positive one. For instance, did the nominee inspire in you a love for literature; assist you in a project or finding other information?

Marty has a heart open to children and the poor, and this is obvious at the Library. Going there is a positive experience because a person entering its doors is immediately aware of help being given to people of all backgrounds. Most libraries of this size do not have a full-time children's librarian. Hackley does. With Marty's guidance, each year Friends budgets \$6000 for children's programs alone. Under her leadership, the number of these free programs grew from 155 in 2001/2002 to 185 in 2010/2011, a year when 4763 children and teens attended. Topics have included gardening, family spelling bees, crafts, and author visits. She has encouraged Friends to subsidize two writing contests and a Black History Month Calendar contest. Results of these competitions are published, and coffeehouse readings feature winners. Pride is instilled in these youngsters, many of whom walk to the Library on their own and think of it as home.

Currently Muskegon County is experiencing 14.3% unemployment, and the city itself has an 11.1% unemployment rate. Many of these unemployed live close to the Library and visit it daily. They are able to get help with resume writing, job searches, and interview techniques. In 2010/2011, 57 adult programs were offered (by contrast, in 2001/2002, there were six). Again, Marty has worked with Friends to pay for these so that there is no charge to patrons. Other subjects have ranged from parenting to healthy cooking to a series of computer training classes offered twice each year. A visitor to the Library never gets the feeling that anyone is unwelcome, even those who have come into the Library just to get warm. Patrons seem to have a sense of purpose. Marty acknowledges them all.

Safety issues are addressed to make the library experience a positive one also: Video cameras were installed in 2007, and a washroom key system is in place, both begun during Marty's directorship. A security person stands near the doorway and greets visitors.

This nomination is being submitted by a group of Friends Board members: Carol Ann Balcom, Angela Maloy, Charlotte Olson, June Shaw, Hayden Smith, and Kathleen Snider. Each has worked closely with Marty for at least four years. Individually, we have been amazed at the comfortable diversity apparent in the rooms at Hackley Public Library. People seem happy here, both employees and public. Marty has trained her staff to retrieve information quickly. It is clear that knowledge is important. Bulletin boards and pamphlet shelves lining the foyer exhibit information on city events and resources. A bookshelf inside the entryway displays recent acquisitions. Marty oversaw a rearrangement of furniture so that DVDs, CDs, and magazines are more visible in their entirety. She opened up a new computer room and increased the number of computers to 26. Space in this

historic building is at a premium, and Marty uses every corner in some positive way. A historic bust of turn-of-the-century lumber baron and library founder Charles Hackley sits beside the main desk. It is indicative of Marty's sense of humor that, with each season, Mr. Hackley wears some new costume, e.g., a Muskegon High sweatshirt during football season, a mortarboard in June, sunglasses during the summer reading programs. Patrons have to smile as they exit.

As Friends Board members, we are eager to learn more about the place, and Marty helps in any way she can. She has led tours through the Library for several of us at a time, and she has taken new Board members on tours individually. She has also led televised tours full of interesting stories and humor. Marty came to Muskegon and Hackley Library in 1995. Her knowledge of the building and its history is extensive.

We find that Marty's door (to an office right off the busy computer room) is open to us, both figuratively and literally. We often hold sub-committee meetings there, where her computer and phone are accessible if we need them. Marty has shown in so many ways that she wants Hackley Library to flourish and that she appreciates all the Friends group does to help this happen. She writes her thanks in our newsletters, she tells us often, she delivers positive strokes, and this spirit overflows so that Friends of Hackley Library is a lively, growing group. Board members willingly volunteer to undertake projects because they know they are appreciated. When Marty expresses a need (from a reception for a retiring librarian to renovation of a department), the Board responds positively right back at her. She has earned its trust, and members know she would not ask for something unless it was needed. This is not always the case with boards. To quote another member: "The woman has more kindness and listens more than anyone I know. If only there were thousands like her!"

3. How has the librarian made a difference in the community? Please be specific.

Whatever improves Hackley Public Library automatically improves the Muskegon community because the Library, a downtown landmark, is an educational treasure. It is surrounded by the city school system's administration building, the Red Cross, Muskegon's performing arts center, the Chamber of Commerce building, several churches, a renowned art museum, and a new culinary arts center. Marty has a good relationship with the leaders of all these institutions and supports their efforts. They, in turn, support the Library, and many are members of Friends. She is active in Rotary, the Congregational Church, PEO, and many other organizations. She is very willing to give talks to city groups.

The adult illiteracy rate in Muskegon County was 16.9% in 2009 (population estimate by U.S. Census Bureau that year was 173,951; city population was 39,259). In the County, nearly 24,000 people over 18 years old do not have a high school diploma; over 100,000 do not have a bachelor's degree. Read Muskegon is

an adult literacy program that hopes to reverse these statistics. With Marty's lead, Hackley has joined Read Muskegon to co-sponsor events. For example, an annual Scrabble Tournament raises funds for Read Muskegon, and Marty herself competes. Many tutors from Read Muskegon and other organizations use the Library for their sessions. The friendly, safe, and quiet atmosphere makes the tutees, who often lack self-confidence, feel secure climbing those steps. The wide ethnic, economic, and age diversity of the library population is non-threatening.

For more advanced readers, Marty cooperates with the Community Foundation and the Robinson family in holding an annual essay contest for high school seniors. Prizes of between \$500 and \$1500 go to three area students and are awarded at an annual Hackley Friends event. This spring one of the essay judges had to withdraw, and Marty stepped in, spending many hours reading and evaluating entries. She did not complain about the extra work but rather expressed delight in the good writing. She has often mentioned the joy she feels in seeing those students' accomplishments.

In an article she wrote in 2009, Marty called the Library a "stimulus package" of its own. How true! The classes mentioned in a previous response help community people in so many areas: employment, use of leisure time, intellectual pursuits. These are all free because Marty works so well with Friends. At her suggestion, the organization raises \$12,000 annually for adult and children's programs. Access to computers for people who cannot afford their own is itself a gift to the community, and the number of times computers were used rose from 35,360 in 2001/2002 to 81,846 in 2008/2009. Marty pursued donations and grants to make this happen, and the computer room is busy all day, offering volunteer technical assistance at certain times. The Library's Business Resource Center aids those starting their own small business. A well-known Genealogy Department helps families trace ancestors. The community obviously feels increasingly free to ask for reference assistance: There were 18,300 reference questions in 2001/2002 and 58,786 seven years later. In 2010/2011, items checked out in person totaled 178,504, a 6.5% increase over the previous year. To help the public know about offerings, Marty began a quarterly newsletter called Community Ink, which is mailed to residents and also available at the front desk. It includes a calendar of events, articles on various departments, and a Q/A section.

The programs featured at Hackley Library have yielded results. More and more people have made use of the facility since Marty took over. Between 2000 and 2010, there was a 356% increase in visitors to the Library and a 309% increase in circulation. Certainly there is a trickle-down effect in a community when more people visit a library. It may not always be measurable quantitatively, but we know it's there. When parents come to learn about child behavior, when the elderly write their memoirs, when youngsters relate to pets or learn about gardening, a community improves.

One Friends Board member said, “Marty has made a major difference in the participation of minority groups in the inner city. . . . The long-term impact of this cannot be underestimated. . . . There will be significant impact on their futures.” Another stated, “Ms. Ferriby takes the library into the community and brings the community into the library. She is well known among all socio-economic levels.” Indeed, Marty is familiar with most groups acting for social justice. When the Friends Board sponsored a talk by prize-winning author Mitch Albom last year, he wanted to donate books to an “underserved” population. Marty had the names of several groups at her fingertips, and \$3000 worth of books were distributed at the Mission for Area People soup kitchen, the Muskegon County Cooperating Churches food truck, and the First Congregational Church United Church of Christ free Saturday breakfast.

4. How has the library, and the nominee, improved the quality of your life?

There are many stories of Marty’s positive effects on individuals. Since we are acting as a group of Friends Board members in nominating Marty, however, we will answer this question as it relates primarily to the Friends organization and Friends Board. We see several areas in which Marty has improved the quality of Friends and the work the group does.

First, Marty is accessible, and she is skilled when it comes to communicating among her various groups: Board of Directors, Friends Board, staff, patrons, community leaders. She attends all of our Friends Board meetings; her director’s report is consistently informative and current. We know exactly what is going on regarding projects at the Library, changes in hours, staff adjustments, policy shifts. She also attends our sub-committee meetings if asked, and she is usually asked because she is full of good ideas and has a fine grasp of the Library’s history. She contributes those ideas but lets us make our own decisions, realizing that each Board and committee creates its own methods. One illustration is the Hackley Distinguished Lecture Program. Each year Friends invites a person with ties to Muskegon to give a free public lecture in the humanities. Recent speakers have been the U.S. ambassador to Russia (600 in attendance), the director of the West Michigan Symphony (an audience of 250), and the general manager of several Tony Award-winning Broadway shows (150 attendees). Marty may well have her own choices, but she lets the lecture committee members decide for themselves whom to invite. She sits in and gives an opinion but never imposes it.

When the Friends Board proposes a fundraising idea, Marty acts as though we are wonderful, whether our suggestion is a reading by a famous author, a recipe book, a Royal Wedding Breakfast, or a themed dinner. She has also worked on all of our events—selling used books, lighting candles for our annual holiday candlelight dinner, putting posters around for the Mitch Albom reading, getting people to vote for our mini-grant project on Facebook, and spending time at Barnes & Noble during our Book Fair. She has taken tablecloths home to launder, and she has stuffed envelopes. Never do we get the feeling that we are there to serve the

Library—rather, she seems to serve us. She also knows the Friends Board by-laws well and can guide us if we forget.

Marty's organizational skills are superb. She keeps precise records. These have helped greatly in promoting Friends membership and in applying for grants. She has a good sense of what projects Friends might pursue successfully. In fall 2009, Friends "adopted" a \$100,000 renovation of the Children's Department after Marty described the needs. The separate youth section had been created on the second floor in 1922, and some original furniture was still being used. The lighting system was so old that replacement bulbs were unavailable. Marty was concerned not only about the area's appearance, but more importantly about accessibility and safety for children. It was a perfect undertaking for Friends members, many of whom had used the area themselves in their early years. This is one example of how Marty "reads" the Friends group and helps us direct our efforts in productive ways, improving the quality of our endeavors. She worked with a historic library specialist to devise a plan sensitive to the building's architecture and history with the aim of reusing and recycling as much as possible. Beginning fall 2010, she helped our Board write grant proposals, seek donations, and hold fundraisers. Now—just one year later—we have raised over \$102,000, and the children will have a bright, modern, and safe area, thanks to Marty's vision and help.

Marty knows what is going on in the world of libraries, and we benefit from her expertise. Another project the Friends Board has taken on is getting the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations (ALTAFF) to name Hackley Library an official Literary Landmark, based on the work done there by Caldecott Award-winning author Verna Aardema. If successful, Hackley will become the seventh such landmark in Michigan, and the accompanying title, bronze plaque, and community celebration will honor the author, the city, and the Library. We would not have known about this project possibility if Marty had not brought it to our attention.

Marty is good with Friends Board members one-on-one too. She has suggested books to individuals and helped with personal research. Here is what one said: "Marty enabled me to continue my scholarly pursuits after leaving the professional workplace. . . .During my forty years in the professional world, I have seen very few people who operate at the level of competency as does Ms. Ferriby, and it has been a pleasure to observe her in action."

5. How does the nominee make the library a better place?

Marty improves Hackley Library in large and small ways. Many have already been described in responses to former questions: her accessibility, enhanced communication, comfortable relationship with a diverse community, excellent organization. One other strength is hiring staff members who are intelligent, efficient, creative, and friendly. Jim Horan, for example, came to Hackley from the Monroe, Michigan, library system, where he coordinated children's activities in 15 branch libraries. He introduced many youth programs to Muskegon and just retired in September 2011 after almost 14 years at Hackley Library, which he calls "a standout place for dedicated co-workers, supportive administration, and an enthusiastic public."

Marty is observant and has foresight, qualities important for someone working with a \$2 million budget and a building declared a Michigan historical site. With the Board of Directors, who consistently praise her work, she saw the need for critical renovations. In fall 2010, together they organized a Capital Campaign Cabinet and Endorsement Council and launched a major fundraising campaign, aiming for \$1.1 million to proceed with phase one of a major updating. Much of the Library's 27, 214 square feet was laid out when far fewer patrons visited. The restrooms have original plumbing. Emergency exits and lighting are inadequate. Marty did not shrink back and allow others to do the work. She spearheaded efforts, compiling lists, applying for grants, attending numerous meetings, writing and mailing letters, generating publicity, giving speeches—all in addition to her daily director's duties. She and her co-workers have been successful. As of early September 2011, \$1,010,000—92 percent—had been raised! When other libraries across the state are having trouble collecting much smaller amounts, it is a tribute to Marty's leadership that Hackley Library is so well loved that people will contribute immediately and generously to help it. Starting soon, space will be reconfigured and changes made. Hackley Library will become even safer, more accessible, and more modern.

Another improvement occurred in summer 2008, and it illustrates Marty's patience in planning. Hackley Library boasts stained-glass windows designed by well-known nineteenth-century glass artist Louis Millet. They are unique. Four huge ones picturing Shakespeare, Goethe, Longfellow, and Prescott form a backdrop for the main reading room. After 118 years, the windows needed to be re-leaded, cleaned, and repaired. For 12 years Friends had held fundraisers and had looked forward to helping with this project. Marty aided their efforts. They finally reached the needed \$140,000. Marty worked with a historic preservation specialist and a local contractor in soliciting bids from firms in five states. They hired the best art glass restorer they could find. She learned and monitored this complex process, worked closely with experts, and clearly communicated procedures. Friends Board members heard all about inventory labels, rubbings, soldering, and leading. Now the windows are once again a tourist attraction, and patrons, staff, and the entire community take pride in them.

A smaller project involving a lost painting illustrates how Marty is observant, smart, and funny, qualities which benefit the Library each day. When she first arrived to work at Hackley in 1995, Marty found an old photo taken in the early 1890s. It revealed that a large portrait of Charles Hackley, painted by E.A. Turner, had once hung in the library vestibule. Marty did some clever detective work and learned that the painting had probably been sent to a school building in 1924. She sent out copies of the photo to custodians, adding the note, "Have you seen this man? He's overdue at Hackley Public Library." Finally someone found the portrait in Muskegon's school administration building. It was in terrible condition. Marty talked to her Friends Board members, and they allocated money set aside in a special fund. This seemed like a fitting use. It took years of work, but in fall 2007 the painting was whole again, and the Library held a small reception to welcome Mr. Hackley back to the walls of the Library he had founded.

These improvement projects have been described in past tense, but Marty's vigilance and her passion for Hackley Public Library exist in present and future tenses also. She improves the Library each day she serves it. Muskegon often refers to the downtown Library as its "gem," but we, her Friends Board, consider Marty the "gem." We can think of no other librarian who deserves this award more. Marty Ferriby is a solid leader, and we are solidly behind her, as are her staff, patrons, volunteers, and Board of Directors. She is skilled not only in library science but also in management, public relations, community development, and other complex matters. It is a privilege for us to be able to say "We Love Our Librarian!" and to nominate her for the Carnegie Corporation of New York/New York Times I Love My Librarian Award.