

I Love My
Librarian!
2011 Award

**NOMINATION FOR
Saundra Ross-Forrest**

Librarian/Branch Head
North Avondale Branch Library
Birmingham Public Library System
Birmingham, Alabama

NOMINATED BY

Gwendolyn B. Guster Welch
Birmingham, Alabama

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

They don't make librarians any better than Saundra Ross Forrest. She's a dedicated, creative, enthusiastic and compassionate librarian who goes beyond the call of duty to develop outreach programs, innovative ideas and a friendly library setting that keep regulars and newcomers walking through the doors. At a time when some people think libraries are a thing of the past, Saundra has shown that a library is a valuable asset - today, tomorrow and beyond.

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?

The North Avondale Library is in the middle of two public housing communities, where a majority of the students are on free and reduced lunch programs. Many of the students live in single parent households, that are near busy streets, railroad tracks and vacant buildings. Saundra doesn't let the socioeconomic conditions of the community stop her from reaching beyond the library walls to help residents and show them what their local library can do for them. She's developed several programs to make all citizens know that the North Avondale Public Library is a safe learning place that serves as the hub of the community.

Saundra and one, full-time library assistant keep the library running at full steam. There is one, part-time library page who works 15 hours a week. But for the most part, Saundra and the other employee keep the library clean, beautifully decorated and fully stocked with the latest media releases. She has no support staff to run her

programs nor the North Avondale Library Facebook fan page, which she maintains on a daily basis with updates about programs, new releases and pictures.

And, even though Sandra lives approximately 25 miles from the library, she shows her community support by attending North Avondale neighborhood meetings and various school events, where she informs residents of new library programs, books and opportunities that are available. She's become one with the library and the community.

On her lunch breaks, she makes weekly home visits to elderly patrons whom are no longer able to visit the library in person. Her weekly visits consist of making book deliveries, dropping off treats or chatting about new library services and programs.

Last year, she recognized that some families were struggling to make ends meet for the new school year, Thanksgiving and Christmas. She arranged to have drives, where people donated toys, school supplies and clothing to benefit certain families. Such drives were a success and helped these families in huge ways. As soon as I heard about the drives, I did not hesitate to donate. These families truly love Sandra and others for what they have done for them. Had it not been for North Avondale Library and Sandra, I don't know what kind of holidays and a return to school these children would have had.

The citizens notice what Sandra has done for the community and aren't shy about praising her. When I visit the library, it's not unusual to hear someone thank Sandra for her efforts. It warms my heart to see someone like Sandra care so much about books as well as people. She loves her job and the people she serves.

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

North Avondale Library is a neighborhood library that serves the North Avondale community, which is located in Birmingham, Ala. Two years ago, Birmingham's mayor proposed that the city council consider closing North Avondale Library in an effort to save the city money. Sandra did not stand for that. She became the library system's strongest advocate. She contacted neighborhood leaders, community faith-based leaders, school administrators, members of the board of education, city department leaders, parents, teachers, students and the business community. She led the largest community conversation group in the city of Birmingham to discuss the needs of the library in the community. She asked neighborhood leaders to contact elected officials and the Birmingham Public Library Board of Trustees to explain why North Avondale Library must remain open.

She developed progressive marketing techniques so others would know the importance of the North Avondale Library. She launched a North Avondale Library

Facebook fan page, sent articles to the Birmingham Board of Education newsletter and reached out to journalists to report of the activities in the library.

She also [ALA American Library Association](#) encouraged the community to support programs at North Avondale Library by making contributions, regardless of the amount. One classroom collected \$20 worth of pennies and donated it to the library, in hopes that it would stop the city from shutting the doors. Sandra proudly displayed the contribution at the library. Other patrons saw it and gave gifts ranging from 25 cents up to \$250.00. Such donations from a community with a high unemployment rate, were considered tremendous.

She also brought various programs to the library. She held a "Hallowread" program on Halloween to provide treats, books, crafts and games in a safe environment for more than 80 neighborhood children; held Thanksgiving and Christmas drives to feed and provide toys and goodies for needy families; hosted a "Hippity Hop Good Time," an Easter Egg Hunt and story time for clients at a nearby nursing home; hosted a "Valentine's Day Gathering," where senior citizens were treated to jazz, games, prizes and a luncheon at the library; started a "Women of Grace" program for young mothers; started a book club to enrich patrons' lives; started a back-to-school supplies and uniform give away to ensure that students had the necessary clothing and supplies needed for the beginning of school; supported daily, after-school tutorial programs; and established an in-house storyteller at North Avondale Library, which is the only neighborhood library in Birmingham Public Library system with one.

Her other innovative events have included a jazz combo, student art exhibits, a student band concert, dance troupes and a workshop on the art of planting tomatoes.


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

Because Sandra is so well connected to the nearby schools and residents, she knows the needs of the community. When a woman with a national organization that helps at-risk children and their families, wanted to start a program at North Avondale Library, Sandra welcomed them with open arms.

Volunteers with Stand Up For Kids started coming to the library every Wednesday afternoon to play games, tutor and do countless other things with children. The volunteers bring refreshments, donate clothing and remember a child's birthday with a special gift. Their presence has made a big difference in the lives of the children and their families. The program is not only about fun, but it's also about teaching basic life skills such as interacting with others, manners, playing fair and more. Sandra and the parents can't imagine what life would be like without Stand

Up for Kids. Parents and teachers often thank Sandra for making the program happen for North Avondale Library.

Sandra has also developed a partnership with the neighborhood schools in an effort to broaden summer reading programs, help children do more research,

expose  students to book talks, create interactive educational games and offer unique teacher in-service programs. Sandra has dedicated library space so that the community Girl Scouts from North Avondale could meet in the building. She

also set up a space and time for the community “We Are Project,” which is a group of tweens and teens addressing teenage issues and growing pains. During the “We Are Project” meetings, Sandra shows the girls how library resources can help them with everyday life issues.

Sandra has shown adults that libraries aren’t just for children; it’s a place for them, too. Parents bring their children to the library to listen to them read, participate in programs, assist them with homework and class assignments and work with them on the computer. Some adults have even heeded Sandra’s advice about how gaining more education will benefit the entire family. Some have pursued their GED and higher education.

When one patron received her certificate from a community college, she said: “I want to thank North Avondale Library for all their support while I was in school. I had a lot of research to do and if it wasn’t for the library being so close to home, I don’t know what I would have done.”

When one patron received her B.S. degree, she said: “I wished that I had been encouraged many years before while I was much younger. Thank you for your encouragement.”

A retiree who is now a member of the library’s book club said: “Thank you for starting the book club because it gives me something to do. I enjoy coming to the library to check out books and reading the books and attending the book club meetings to discuss the books and sharing time with the book club members. It makes me feel good.”

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

While many people look at the North Avondale community as a place where children could be destined to a life of drugs, teenage pregnancy and poverty, Sandra has a different viewpoint. She sees the area as a place that can grow a garden full of successful professionals. To reap such a harvest, it depends on what you put into the soil. Sandra is using her library to plant seeds that are destined for greatness. She doesn't believe in the word, "No." She uses the power of "Yes" as fertilizer to make the community's garden something that will benefit everyone.

When you talk to Sandra about what she's doing in the community, she actually glows. You can't fake that. It's real. Patrons see her sincerity, which makes them want to return to the library day after day.

She greets everyone with a smile, makes the place fresh, bright and welcoming with colorful posters and decorations and goes out of her way to help patrons.

Our area was hit by a horrific tornado on April 27, 2011. It ruined homes and lives, killing and injuring many. Prior to the storm, one woman often attended the book club meetings that Sandra started. But after the storm, the woman was left in a wheelchair, unable to attend the meetings in person. Sandra came up with the idea to have the woman call in during the book club gathering. The patron's call would be put on speaker phone so she could still participate. Such an action was a first for the library. The woman truly appreciated it, saying it helped her stay connected, even in her time of healing.

Sandra makes her library the "in" place to be so much that people constantly sing her praises. Here's a sampling of what some had to say:

"I think that North Avondale Library does a great job of working with the children in the community," a library volunteer said.

"I always know where to come when I need assistance with something, to North Avondale Library," a retired community educator said.

"North Avondale Library is the place to go for the newest educational resources, entertainment, arts and crafts, story time, book discussions, computers, research and so much more. Sandra lets citizens know when the latest books and media materials are available," a library board member said.

"True library champions," the library director commented on Facebook.

“I think the library is an essential element in the community that doubles as a hub for gaining information and as a meeting center for residents who are in need of meeting space within their communities,” the city council president said.

As you can see, I'm very proud of everything Sandra Ross has done to make North Avondale Library a jewel in the community's crown. Library funding is tight, but she manages to present quality programs with her limited budget. Patrons would never know she's working on a shoestring budget to give them top-notch programs. It's because of her dedication and creativeness that she's managed to make North Avondale Library a shining star.