



The New York Times
NYTIMES.COM

I Love My Librarian!

2008 Award

Nominations for Amy J. Cheney

Librarian

Alameda County Library, Juvenile Hall
San Leandro, California

Nominator:

Sonia Osborne

Pittsburg, California

1. How long have you known the nominee and how did you come to know him or her?

I have known and worked with Amy Cheney for the past five years. I met her when I transferred from Community School to Juvenile Hall. An influencing factor in my transfer was my knowledge of the "Write to Read" literacy program run by Alameda County Public Library in conjunction with Probation and the School Dept. The teacher I replaced had worked with her, and I was interested as a language arts teacher in continuing the connection. We immediately began collaborating on author visits and student access to books, which we continue to do.

2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and others and made your experience of the library a positive one.

Amy has inspired literally thousands of detained students who pass through this facility. Many read their first book ever while here. The slogan on brochures and e-mail reads: "I don't feel like Write to Read just gave me a book and asked me to read; I feel like they gave me a book and told me to dream, to see a better life for me." They trust her opinions on books and she responds to their requests in a timely matter. She seems to have read almost everything! She also keeps staff and teachers up on the latest literature for or about youth.

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

To continue from above, Amy has almost single-handedly transformed this potentially dismal environment into a halcyon of literacy. And she is humble about her endeavors. She would not want me to be stating these things. Her position is not even full-time, which is why I volunteer my time as her unofficial assistant. Yet, she is personal and available to all. She can find a book for even the most reluctant reader.

4. How does the nominee make the library a better place? Please be specific.

Now that we have moved into our new Juvenile Justice Center, we actually have a library space which is comfortable, easy to negotiate, very organized, utilizes volunteers, and additionally stocks libraries in 12 living units and multiple classrooms. She works diligently to get students in the library as often as possible, even from the maximum security units. One of her unfulfilled dreams is to improve the decor and comfort with amenable furniture.

5. How has the librarian made a difference in the community?

Amy coordinates schedules with the Probation Dept., the School Dept., and visiting authors. The latter include: Jimmy Santiago Baca, Ishmael Beah, Michael Eric Dyson, Zlata Filipovic, Nikki Giovanni, Erin Gruwell, Joseph Marshall, Terry McMillan, Mary Monroe, Victor Rivas Rivers, Susan Taylor, and Dave Zirin. We have also presented performances by Word for Word, and hosted speakers like Dolores Huerta (co-founder of UFW) and Terrance Roberts (one of the Little Rock Nine). She develops and maintains a personal as well as professional relationship with these high profile persons, to the degree that they commit themselves to responding to her requests; even making contact voluntarily if they happen to be in the area. Students write responses like: "hearing the story with you standing in front of me had a big effect," and "thanks for helping me open my eyes and giving me hope that I can make it in this life." A parent responded that her formerly troubled daughter now "loves to read and recommends books to me all the time. Her vocabulary has also improved just from her reading. She no longer talks like a streetwise young person." Before the library program began, 68% of surveyed students said there were not any good books to read. It dropped to 5%. The 33% who said they did not like to read dropped to 3%. After author visits, 60% wanted to read more books by those authors. In addition to several community awards, "Write to Read" was a 2006 winner (one of only ten in the nation) of the Coming Up Taller Award, bestowed by the President's Committee

on the Arts and Humanities, acknowledging the program as an exemplary national model of serving the literacy needs of incarcerated youth. Her latest endeavor involves the CRISIS Male Advocacy Program, presented by an author and former inmate at San Quentin who was pardoned by the current governor. She has most definitely made a difference in the community, one with unique and desperate needs. It takes an awesome person to spearhead all of that. Amy Cheney is that kind of librarian and humanitarian. Thank you for your kind consideration.

Nominator:

Janice Thomas, Ph.D.
San Leandro, California

1. How long have you known the nominee and how did you come to know him or her?

I have known Ms. Cheney for her work at the Alameda County Juvenile Hall (what is now known as the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center) for the past eight years. During this time period, I have seen her grow the Hall's library resources. She started with a small section of the special education work room and would cart books to minors throughout the hall. Through her grantsmanship, networking skills, creativity, and effective advocacy, she now occupies a larger room which is solely dedicated as a library. She filled up the library with wall to wall books and made sure that every housing unit had a bookshelf stacked with books. It's one thing to have a lot of books, but it's another thing to have books that attract delinquent youth. The books she found captivate the youth such that teenagers normally alienated from the reading experience are taken away to a far away land through reading adventures. In addition to find inspiring literature, she has (at least) several speakers a month who are authors of the books the minors have read. She asks the youth to write about their experience, which adds to the quality of the programming. It has been in this work context that I have come to know Ms. Cheney. I'm a big fan.

2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and others and made your experience of the library a positive one.

Ms. Cheney has been very receptive to suggestions. As a specialist in the psychological effects of trauma, I have been pleased that Ms. Cheney has been receptive to purchasing books which address this potentially violent topic and has included formats which are accessible to youth (e.g. a memoir in the form of a graphic novel). It helps me in my work as a clinical psychologist to be able to use bibliotherapy as an adjunct to

individual and group therapy. In addition to being receptive to other people's ideas, Ms. Cheney has also been very helpful in familiarizing me to the books already available in the library. For example, I was interested in developing a curriculum around Dr. Joe Marshall/Street Soldiers violence prevention curriculum, and she provided me with the requested books and also led me in the direction of books on the same topic by other authors.

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

The library at the Alameda County Juvenile Hall is a positive, enriching, wholesome, and entertaining experience for youth who otherwise have very few rehabilitative experiences in the confines of juvenile hall. I have seen delinquent youth become angry when they are denied the privilege of going to the library. I have also seen the youth angry when staff does not allow them to bring a book into their little rooms (more accurately known as single-person cells). The enriching experience of well-written books about topics of interest to the youth cannot be overestimated.

4. How does the nominee make the library a better place? Please be specific.

Let me count the ways...! I cannot remember all the speakers and violence prevention workshops she has brought to the Hall. A brief list of the speakers includes best selling and award winning authors, e.g. Ishmael Beah and Jimmy Santiago Baca; Civil Rights leaders, e.g. Dolores Huerta and Terrance Roberts; featured in films relevant to youth, e.g. Erin Gruwell: Freedom Writer's Diary and James Farmer, Jr.: the Great Debaters. She has also brought in high caliber community organizations, e.g. Dr. Joe Marshall/Street Soldiers who is a MacArthur Grant Genius Award winner. In short, Ms. Cheney has single-handedly built a rehabilitative culture from which youth may benefit from the written and spoken word.

5. How has the librarian made a difference in the community?

By enriching the lives of these neglected youth, and by leading the way for those adults who wish to inspire youth through literature, Ms. Cheney has made a huge difference in Alameda County. Her library program gives youth a positive experience with literature when some youth have never had a positive experience with reading. Reading for these youth has been dry and boring rather than relevant and exciting. I applaud Ms. Cheney for her dedication to her craft. We are lucky to have her.

