

A Chester County Library Quest - by Sandra L. Crook

As I return to school in late August, it's typical to ask students and colleagues, "How did you spend your summer?" Responses often include beach trips and family getaways. Besides my beloved planned vacations, I jot down an annual "summer bucket list" of neighboring places that I can experience as time allows. During the school year, the list is reserved for places I tuck away and save for later. "I'll do that in the summer..." I often repeat.

This summer, my list included exploring one of Chester County's most understated resources; visiting all eighteen libraries. Yes, eighteen libraries in case you weren't aware! As a born and bred Chester County resident, the library has always been a part of my adolescence but now as a middle-aged adult, I've been reminded the vitality our library system serves for county residents. Although our bucolic county is diverse in so many ways, the similarities abound. The libraries serve as a hub, nestled within the town or city center. Most libraries are walkable or if not, supply ample parking and shoulder a park or outdoor sitting area. For many, the library serves as a "third" place; the philosophy that beyond work and home, everyone needs a third place to spend their time, a place to feel connected. Each library I visited, I felt welcomed.

I humbly admit, I didn't know much about the hidden library gems other than the Henrietta Hankin branch I call "home." I readily request "holds" for books outside my home library and overtime became curious when searches listed other branches. (Thank you for retrieving all those requests!) In late June, I began my journey. I drove from library to library, often including more than one library a day. Without a doubt, each location has its own charm and serves its community in a unique way. When I shared my endeavor with some of the employees, they were eager to share information about their site and special niche. The pride for their individual library was heartwarming and indeed, deserved. I was awe-struck at how many

different events, activities and learning opportunities were made available for every age, and at each location! Gone are the days when patrons are shushed. As one library director described, “the children’s storytime is what gets them in the door,” but I added it is the wealth of other essential resources that keep residents returning. Have you seen the county's list of library services? The reliable wi-fi, computers, passport assistance, STEM kits, tutoring, air conditioning, meeting rooms, and social activities for every interest serve the community in immeasurable ways. It’s impressive to say the least and too many services to list.

Tredyffrin offered an impressive collection of century old historical maps and documents of our county. For Atglen, an adult quilting group served as a place for fellowship. For Spring City, the burgeoning YA section kept teens returning. From an outsider’s perspective, Malvern’s plant swap in the back room was a beautiful offering of growth, beyond a literary sense. At other locations, I witnessed young mothers engaging their children in reading, and adults using computers to research possible job inquiries. Young children were giddy with delight about 3D printing at the Makerspace which was also a first time for me. And yes, of course, the books! There were bountiful displays of books and staff picks for patrons to choose from. Many libraries, such as Coatesville, offered books in Spanish. There were also several “French Coming Soon” signs at various locations. At Eastown, an animated storyteller read to exuberant children. I observed old and young patrons perusing the shelves with meticulous care. The impressive Kennett Square branch will undoubtedly bring renewed energy to the area while a few other locations are under construction, and the Honey Brook branch is hopeful about its future. It’s an exciting season for the Chester County Library system.

As I checked out books from the various branches, and shared my purpose with a few of the assistants, they praised my efforts and shared with me that they too had never visited the

other locations. They wished me well on my journey. Through this experience, I gained a greater appreciation for the our county and its library system. It is one that values learning and the betterment for us all, a place I am proud to reside. As the new school year begins, I'll look to share my experiences with students and colleagues and maybe sign up for a workshop at the Makerspace. I have more to learn!