

Column: Warren-Newport Library marks 50 years in circulation

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FULL TEXT

Besides a host of new laws taking effect in 2023, a Gurnee institution celebrates 50 years serving the community. The Warren-Newport Public Library opened on Jan. 10, 1973.

Five decades ago seems a long way away from the extreme pace of today's technology-driven world, where library patrons can download books and magazines to their wireless devices. Or listen to them on their cellphones.

Warren-Newport Library is one of 20 central public libraries in Lake County. There are more than 600 public libraries in Illinois, and according to the American Library Association an estimated 116,867 nationwide.

Some may remember those heady days of the 1970s, that "Me Decade," which was coined by author Tom Wolfe. For 1973, it was the beginning and unraveling of President Richard Nixon's second term in office; the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Federal Express began operations in 1973, and New York City's World Trade Center opened. "The Exorcist" premiered and frightened moviegoers across the nation.

Back in 1971 when the idea of a tax-supported library began flowering in the village, members of the Gurnee Women's Club didn't have movies in mind. They had their sights set on a library.

Until then, Warren Township residents had few alternatives if they wanted to be library patrons. One was to head to the city of Waukegan's downtown library and sign up as nonresidents to check out books for themselves and family members.

Some of those Waukegan library nonresident users were members of the Gurnee Women's Club, which took up the campaign in 1971 for a library in the township. At the time, the township's population didn't have enough to establish a library district, which is why Newport Township was included in the successful referendum campaign establishing the library.

At first operating out of a small storefront on Old Grand Avenue with about 3,000 volumes, the library moved to its current site on O'Plaine Road, just north of Washington Street, in 1978, when Betty Russell, who was the longtime director of the Gurnee Park District, was president of the district. From those humble beginnings, the district has become one of Lake County's busiest in terms of circulation.

In 1986, the library expanded, and in 1997 opened a \$5.6 million, 31,000-square-foot addition. Another extensive expansion and renovation project was completed in December 2011, according to a News-Sun story at the time. Improvements included additional study and community meeting rooms, a new teen space, and a new home for the Friends of the Library-sponsored used-book sales.

The library also has kept up with innovation as traditional libraries have become sanctuaries and learning resource centers. A 2004 News-Sun story reported the library was an early adopter of passive radio frequency identification (RFID) technology to automate check-ins of books and media. At checkout, a receipt tells patrons how much they have saved by using the library instead of buying books. Or so I have been told.

Programming over the library's 50 years has expanded to include adult computer classes, children story times, book clubs and teen game nights, along with help with job searches. It has become a central location for township learning activities.

The library serves more than 60,000 people within a 55-square-mile area that covers all of Warren Township and

most of Newport Township. It boasts a collection of more than 300,000 books, hundreds of magazines and more than 37,000 CDs, DVDs and audiobooks. Its bookmobile serves dozens of neighborhoods and subdivisions in Warren and Newport townships.

Executive Director Ryan Livergood promises special happenings throughout the yearlong birthday celebration. That will include, "fun events and creative opportunities to reflect on our library's history, as well as imagine our library's future."

Part of that will be introducing a refreshed Quiet Reading Room space in the library, new collections and updated technology. Also planned are birthday and '70s-themed events throughout the anniversary year.

About those 1970s-themed events: Hopefully there won't be disco balls and the required wearing of bell-bottoms. Regardless, happy birthday to the Warren-Newport Library.

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