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Libraries: A Gateway to Learning

Children’s author Tomie dePaola said, “Reading is important, because if you can read, you can learn anything about everything and everything about anything.” My mom taught me this simple yet profound approach to learning. By reading, we open a door to worlds not yet touched by human hands—worlds we can learn and grow from, worlds we make our own.

Homeschooled my entire life, I know libraries were—and still are—a big part of learning. The youngest of four children, I was taught the importance of libraries and reading from the onset. At least once a week, my mom would pile all of my siblings and me in the car and drive to our local library. Even when I was too young to read and understand words, my mom helped me pick out books she would read to me. Because she made this type of effort to teach me about reading, I have grown up loving the library: gladly calling it my “second home” because of how often I frequented the location.

Being a one-income family, we took advantage of the library’s free resources for schoolwork, not just for pleasure. We had access to books, DVDs, CDs, and audiobooks we normally would not have been able to afford. Libraries are essential in North Carolina, especially for students like me—students who are sometimes unable to afford the materials needed to help them learn beyond the classroom. According to “The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading,” statistics show that about 67% of children nationwide are not proficient readers by the end of third grade, starting a disinterest in education.

During the early years of my education, story time and other programs at the library helped further my knowledge: not just of reading, but also of other interesting subjects. My love of the programs at the library led me to volunteer at my local branch—the Gaston County Public Library—during the

summertime. As a teen volunteer, I was able to assist during the programs, help around the children's area of the library, and form friendships with other volunteers and librarians.

This volunteer work resulted in my becoming a part of the library's Teen Advisory Board, a year-round committee of teens who meet and help plan programs for elementary-, middle-, and high-school students. Not only did I have the privilege of planning programs for the library, I also gave back by working some of the children's events. My hope is this helped further their love of reading: the same way the library provided those services for the younger, highly impressionable version of me.

One of my favorite programs to plan while serving as a teen volunteer was *Murder Mystery at the Library*. It combined two of my favorite subjects: mysteries and writing. I had the honor of writing an original storyboard for the program, complete with a plotline, character backgrounds, possible murder weapon descriptions, and question-and-answer preparations for each actor playing a suspect. Knowing all the weeks of hard work that went into planning just this one program, it made me realize how lucky I had been as a kid: having people dedicated to planning events and activities. This is truly a gift to the community. Sadly, I was not able to attend to witness firsthand the final result of the program because I was very sick. Honestly, my three-and-a-half-year battle with chronic illness has affected my life in ways I could not have imagined.

I never understood Tomie dePaola's words more than during my sophomore and junior year of high school. In early 2016, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that, when at its worst, kept me homebound for weeks at a time. During those days, I could do nothing but lay in bed—being so tired and weak I could barely move, much less do schoolwork. I found solace in my faith and in the activity that had always brought me the most joy: reading. Since normal desk work was not an option, I heeded whatever I could by reading book after book checked out from the library. Just like dePaola said, I learned “anything about everything and everything about anything.”

In J.K. Rowling's famous *Harry Potter* series, Harry is called "The Boy Who Lived." But he seems to have the worst luck of all, since the villainous Lord Voldemort is seeking to constantly destroy him. Yet, even in the face of danger, Harry finds comfort in the form of his close friends and teachers. Living in a world so full of evil and hate, Harry still sees the magic in everything—magic to be used for good. In some ways, I compare my sickness to Voldemort and myself to Harry. Though it is constantly trying to tear me down, I still try to see the goodness and the magic in my life. As Harry's wise headmaster Albus Dumbledore said, "Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

Now on the road to remission and back to studying my schoolwork in more traditional ways, I still try to learn everything I can by reading books. My remission is allowing me to work a part-time job at the Gaston County Public Library, the same place that gave me opportunities many years ago. I have the privilege of organizing books and making the library offerings readily accessible to others in the community. It is another way of my giving back to the place that gave so much to me years ago, but especially recently: an available escape – in the form of books – during a time of great personal distress. The library has proven to be my gateway to learning throughout my life. My wish is for other students to discover a similar path that begins at the library.