

Five Libraries Take 2018 IMLS Top Honors

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Representing every region of the country, five libraries have been honored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) with a 2018 National Medal for Museum and Library Service: Georgetown Public Library, TX; Orange County Library System, FL; Pueblo City—County Library District, CO; Reading Public Library, PA; and Rochester Public Library, MN.



The winning institutions are ones that bring about positive change, both for individual patrons and in the community as a whole. "Through their programs, services, and partnerships, these institutions exemplify the many ways that libraries and museums are positively transforming communities across the nation," IMLS director Kathryn K. Matthew said in a statement.

Choosing from among the 29 outstanding finalists was, of course, difficult. "For 2018, IMLS was particularly interested in programs that build community cohesion and serve as a catalyst for positive community change, with programs that provide services for groups that include veterans and military families, at-risk children and families, the unemployed and underemployed, and youth confronting barriers to STEM-related employment," Matthew told *Library Journal*.

Despite considerable differences in community needs, geography, and size, the five public libraries that came out on top all have one thing in common: they're changing lives every day.

Georgetown Public Library Georgetown, TX

"Shouts of joy were heard all over the library" from the Georgetown staff when director Eric Lashley told them they'd won a National Medal, he reported, adding, "I gave every staff member a 'gold' medal on a ribbon."

What set Georgetown apart from the pack, Lashley offered, was the exceptional level of trust the library has in the community—and vice versa. "We do not have any security gates. In my opinion, security gates tell your visitors they can't be trusted." In 2017, the meeting rooms at Georgetown—where the total population is 67,000—were used more than 1,600 times, including "after the library



Tween Garden Club meets on the patio outside the library coffee shop, led by librarian Toni Nietfeld, at Georgetown Public Library

closes and before the library opens. Our policies are patron-centric, not staff-centric," said Lashley.

As they enter the building, patrons see three words prominently displayed, which sum up the mission statement of Georgetown: Engage. Enlighten. Empower. "If the parking lot is full, we're having a good day at the library," said Lashley.

Orange County Library System (OCLS) Orlando, FL

ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] training. Career Online High School. The lauded Melrose Center for Technology, Innovation, and Creativity. Inspired Children's STEM education. Those are just some of the distinguishing services that landed OCLS on the IMLS short list.

"This award is an acknowledgment of the fact that our libraries provide people with an opportunity to engage in truly meaningful learning experiences that they won't find anywhere else," said OCLS director and CEO Mary Anne Hodel. Case in point: Orlando resident Terhys Persad, who learned video editing at the Melrose Center, which enabled her to create Where Art Thou, a travel web series that explores the world through art. The Melrose Center is the only library facility in the country with audio, video, and photography studios and simulation labs, and classes to support related instruction, all in one location.

Another program that sprung from OCLS staff's determination to address needs specific to their community are the popular sewing classes. Participants are getting jobs with the nearby theme park costume departments and as alteration specialists. To help the influx of new residents into the Orlando area from Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, ESOL classes were expanded to 11 branches.

"We think about our community and its needs, then we try to figure out how we can help," said Hodel. "Maybe we can't solve an entire problem, but we can do *something* that is consistent with our mission."

Pueblo City-County Library District (PCCLD) Pueblo, CO

A large municipality consisting of ten libraries, PCCLD serves a range of community members with a variety of needs. Meeting them requires an equally diverse slate of services, a lofty goal the library has met and exceeded.

"We have worked strategically over the past several years to align our services with the needs of our community," Jon Walker, executive director of PCCLD, told *Library Journal*. That work has paid off in the form of skyrocketing checkouts, use of digital resources, visits to libraries, and attendance at



The 2017 Summer Reading Kickoff event at the PCCLD Rawlings branch

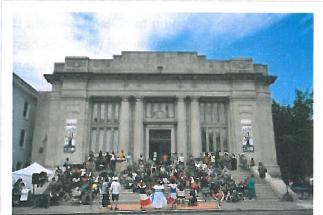
library-sponsored programs and events. Among those is the All Pueblo Reads series, which attracted more than 39,000 participants in 2017; gang intervention programming with licensed social workers in at-risk neighborhoods; Accessible Avenues services for customers with special needs; and community gardens and a seed lending library. Many others were equally successful.

Yet "nothing we do is more important than our support for early childhood literacy," insisted Walker. That support is demonstrated in PCCLD's Supporting Parents with Early Literacy through Libraries, reaching socioeconomically challenged families with early literacy support; a partnership with local schools to automatically issue library cards to students; and an award-winning summer reading program. "I was among hundreds joyfully marching in our season-ending kids' parade, celebrating a successful summer of reading," recalled Walker. What could top that? Winning the IMLS National Medal comes pretty darn close, he said. "It truly is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence."

Reading Public Library Reading, PA

Reading, a city of 90,000 people in southeastern Pennsylvania, is one of the poorest in the United States. "So we offer programs and services to help residents bridge the literacy divide in five areas...basic literacy, civic and social literacy, information literacy, health literacy, and financial literacy," Bronwen Gamble, Reading Public Library executive director, explained to *Library Journal*.

Reading Public takes its programs, such as "Returning Citizens" for those coming out of incarceration, outside its walls, including to homeless shelters. "By taking library services



Storytelling Through Dance 2017 at Reading Public Library
Photo credit: Reading Eagle

out into the community, we learn what our residents need, what they dream about, and the stumbling blocks they face," said Gamble.

As with many places in America, the opioid crisis has hit close to home in Reading. "After five overdoses and one death inside the main library, rather than wringing our hands, we organized an Opioid Crisis Panel which brought medical personnel, victims' families, and concerned officials together," said Gamble.

Providing digital access is a major focus. "All four branches provide Wi-Fi 24/7. We see patrons sitting outside with their mobile devices long after the buildings are closed. We provide an eCard, allowing access to all our digital media and equipment, to anyone who lives, works, or goes to school in Reading."

Gamble was not expecting the call with the news of the library's win. "I honestly thought she was letting me down gently," recalled Gamble. "I was speechless for a few seconds." The staff was treated to a celebration breakfast, which they thought was for another reason, until the board president announced the real cause for celebration. "What a great moment!" said Gamble.

Rochester Public Library Rochester, MN

Removing barriers by serving as a welcoming space is the mission of Rochester Public Library. "We strive to listen and respond, so that every member of our community has the opportunity to succeed," said library director Audrey Betcher.

Community member James Arnold has experienced firsthand the life-changing influence that Rochester Public Library can have. Arnold first discovered his talent for writing at the library. "I started out as an incredibly awful poet, but luckily the writing group we started at the library was there to help me grow," Arnold told U. "We shared our writing, critiqued each other, and laughed a lot." Arnold wound up winning a library writing contest. "This gave me quite a bit of an ego boost, but also helped me to realize that maybe it was something I should pursue." And when Arnold, who is headed to the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in the fall, first identified as transgender, the library was a safe place to explore his identity. "The library, and, more specifically, the librarians, are the entire reason I'm going to college," Arnold shared. "I never planned on going." The librarians at Rochester, though, always wanted what was best for him, and encouraged him to apply. "Eventually I did, and I had an incredible support system throughout the whole process."

The museums spotlighted by IMLS with a 2018 National Medal are the Children's Museum of Denver at Marsico Campus; the Detroit Historical Society; the El Paso Museum of Art, TX; the History Museum at the Castle in Appleton, WI; and the University of Oregon's Museum of Natural and Cultural History.

The ten awards were presented at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, DC, on May 24. <u>StoryCorps</u>, a nonprofit dedicated to recording the stories of Americans, will visit each winning institution to gather stories from community members whose lives have been bettered by that library or museum. The resulting collections will be preserved at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

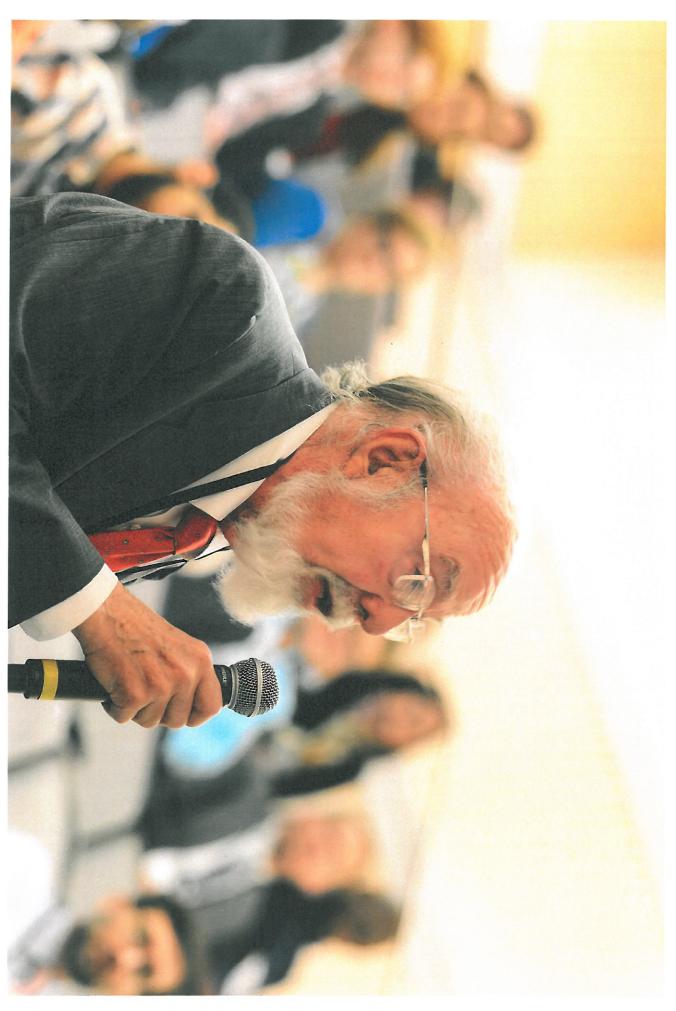
The deadline for nominations for the 2019 National Medal is October 1, 2018.







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