

Looking Back: 28 Years at the Noyes Library
by Cherry Wunderlich
Fall 2000

Shortly before her retirement at the end of August, Joan Nelson, longtime librarian at the Noyes Children's Library in Kensington, shared memories of her 28 years there. We sat in a corner of the cozy one-room library, still housed in the original building where, more than 100 years ago, it became the first public library in the Washington metropolitan area. The distinctive owl carving and the "NoYes" sign still greet visitors from above the front door.

"We want the library to be warm and inviting and personal—a wonderful way to introduce very young children to libraries," Joan told me. "Parents like it because it is one room with one door."

"Often, folks come in with their children and say 'I used this library and want my children to have the same experience I did.'"

Nora Kaplan was the librarian when Joan joined the staff in the early 1970's. "There were just the two of us. Nora did a wonderful job in setting the pace," Joan recalls. Then Barbara Widem, later the children's librarian at the Kensington Park Library, joined the Noyes staff.

Ann Seeley and Marguerite Murray are two others Joan remembers with appreciation. "Ann's vision was to have this be a children's library. She really developed the children's book collection in Montgomery County."

"Then Marguerite Murray took over. She was a program person as well as a book person. She got the Penny Theatre started. It's still going today. Penny Theatre originated in Victorian England, where children could buy a book and cut out the stage. A book in color cost tuppence. Black and white was called Penny Plain. Marguerite saw it in England and thought it would be a wonderful way to present literature to children."

During the 1993 Centennial, Joan recalled, staff and families buried a time capsule on the grounds. The children voted on the books they would most like future children to enjoy. For picture fiction, they chose Goodnight Moon. The winning poetry collection was Winnie the Pooh, while The Secret Garden was the fiction favorite.

In its early years, the Noyes Library had a membership fee of \$1 per year, although the reading rooms were free. Joan showed me the original account book, started in the 1890's. Each line flowed in precise and graceful slanting handwriting, still easy to read more than a century later. The journal reports that the librarian received a salary of \$5 for February 1893 and \$10 for May 1911.

Over the years, the community has supported the library in many ways, most recently through the foundation established ten years ago during county budget cutbacks.

Today, the Noyes Children's Library serves the entire county as a resource center for children from early childhood through 3rd to 4th grade. The librarians have created special children's programs such as the Preschool Discovery Centers and the Grandparent Kits on themes like Monkeys, Teddy Bears, and the Farm. The library is open each Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, welcoming children and families to explore the collection; borrow materials; and enjoy the storytelling, Penny Theatre, and other special events.

"I feel blessed to have been able to be here all these years," Joan concluded. "I hope that this little library will remain just what it is—a comfortable environment for young children and a place to introduce children to using the public library in the most friendly comfortable way possible."

Thank You, Joan

"Joan put Noyes on the map with her outstanding storytelling skills as well as her other library skills. She recognizes quality in children's literature. She was an expert public relations problem handler. She really was

helpful in saving Noyes after the county cut our budget. She has a wicked sense of humor. As a colleague, Joan couldn't be beaten. She has dignity and class and integrity.”

—Nora Kaplan, retired Noyes librarian

“She brought her expertise from New York to Montgomery County. She has incredible knowledge of the profession of storytelling. Her style is direct and brings you right in. She doesn't need props or gimmicks to keep her audience spellbound. Besides storytelling, she has a wonderful way with children, listens to them one-on-one. Her training of Early Childhood professionals has had a wide-ranging effect on our county. She models behavior for other librarians.”

—Saroj Ghoting, librarian

“I worked for her for five years. She's just a wonderful person. The best children's librarian I have ever known. She inspired me to be a better librarian and a better person. She's very modest and truly classy. We'll miss her.”

—Carolyn Maddox, librarian