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One Library Visit

Readers may be surprised to learn that it is not unusual for Library Board Trustees/Directors sometimes to visit other public Libraries while on vacation to learn about their experiences and services. I want to tell you about one that I have visited.

The Stratford Public Library in Canada is, first of all, somewhat unique. It sits cozily in Stratford, Ontario, which itself is an enigma as a world-class center for all things Shakespeare at the center of an otherwise sprawling farm area. From Pittsburgh, eventually driving east-to-west in Ontario, one gets there through London; London in Ontario that is. Stratford's population is about 30,000. It, like its namesake in England, is a mecca for visitors drawn by high culture. Stratford, Ontario is the bucolic home for Canada's Stratford Festival and its four remarkable, prominent theaters, which dominate the lifeblood of the town.

The Festival name itself, of course, immediately conjures up William Shakespeare, as it should, and sometimes that scrunches up a nose; I have heard it before: "I'm just not into Shakespeare." But there is a lot more to enjoy. First of all, the productions are not entirely Shakespearean. There are musicals, such as "Chicago" and "The Music Man" in recent years, period comedies by other playwrights, and modern stage productions as well. The theaters host lots of special programming around the main events, including lectures. And there are great restaurants within easy walking distance amidst the hotels, motels, and B&Bs serving fresh, farm food.

At the rim of this seasonally cultural bustle, its home prominently and picturesquely positioned on an overlooking hillock in the downtown, near the aptly named Avon River and beautifully maintained gardens, is the Stratford Public Library. I found time on one of many visits to explore it and speak with a staff person. She gave me a free although well out-of-date paperback to keep about the Library's history 1846-2003, as well as the current Strategic Plan of that time, 2019-22.

Stratford Public Library has its origins in 1846. It was born of a rudimentary form not unlike many public Libraries. The location of the collection wandered around town for some years like a peripatetic fountain of books. The existing Library building itself was not constructed on its site until 1903. Still, consider that Murrysville Community Library's own origins trace to only 1922, and it, too, wandered around a little, before settling in its current site in 1994.

So, what did I learn from this visit that pertains to my current roles working with local WLN Libraries? First of all, aside from the unique circumstances of location described above, what it did not lead to was my coming home with a particular "let me tell you about this very special Library idea that I found up in Canada." The location and cultural environment are of themselves unique and special, a focal point for this Library, and not easily reproduced elsewhere. A whole community is invested in this place.

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It did remind me of the dearly held value of Library to community, but also that keeping public Libraries relevant in a rapidly changing world is a paramount and difficult task. Stratford Public Library is relevant by dint of its communal association to Stratford, Canada, a cultural center that draws the world to it. The inspiration is just seeing Stratford Public Library at work being part of that, reminding me to bring the message home about always needing to express inspiration with specifics and with clear vision, even if one's community is not Stratford, Ontario.

Charles B. Greenberg,
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation