



Buffalo & Erie County Public Library wins 2021 ALA Penguin Random House Library Award for Innovation

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CHICAGO - The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, New York, has been named the 2021 winner of American Library Association's (ALA) Penguin Random House Library Award for Innovation. The award, supported by Penguin Random House, the world's largest trade book publisher, recognizes U.S. libraries and librarians who create lasting innovative community service programs that successfully inspire and connect with new readers. The award will be presented in June at the ALA Virtual Annual Meeting preceding the ALA Presidents Program.

"We are grateful to have been selected as the winner of the Penguin Random House Library Award for Innovation Through Adversity for our children's sports equipment lending and library card amnesty program," said Buffalo & Erie County Public Library Director Mary Jean Jakubowski. "In its first year, our program Exercise for the Body and Mind welcomed hundreds of children back to the Library and erased more than \$15,000 in fines and fees from their library cards when they borrowed kid-sized sports kits including soccer balls, lacrosse sticks, and snowshoes. The program, which began as a pilot in one Library located in a diverse and underserved neighborhood in the City of Buffalo, will be expanding into eight libraries throughout Erie County this summer. This is another example of how libraries are creating opportunities to remove barriers while investing in their communities," added Ms. Jakubowski.

"At Penguin Random House, we recognize the crucial importance of libraries within our communities, and we are thrilled to honor the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library with this award," said Skip Dye, Senior Vice President, Sales Operations & Library Sales, Penguin Random House. "The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library supported the health of young people in their community by encouraging reading and physical activity – all during a global pandemic – and their innovative, adaptive programming deserves to be recognized and celebrated."

Exercise for the Body and Mind - Children's Library Card Amnesty Program and Sports Equipment Lending Program is a community project to welcome children back to the Library. Approximately 42% of the Erie County, New York youth population under 17 had Buffalo & Erie County Public Library cards. Nearly a quarter of that total (22%), or 18,000 youth, were in a status that did not allow them to utilize all library resources, including suspended borrowing privileges. A fun, family-friendly program was created to alleviate the financial burden and stigma families and youth felt. The goal was to bring thousands of local children back into good standing so they could take advantage of the multitude of available library services. Under the guidance from Library Director Mary Jean Jakubowski, the Library and partners instituted a sports equipment lending and library card amnesty (Play Down Your Fines) program at its Isaías González-Soto Branch Library, located in Buffalo, NY's urban Lower West Side neighborhood (selected for being situated in an immigrant-rich underserved neighborhood and next to a City park). When children borrow and return the sports equipment (soccer, lacrosse, and snowshoe kits), all fines, fees, and charges are removed from their card accounts, and they can again benefit from library services.

Play Down Your Fines and the Sports Equipment Lending program are targeted to children ages 5 – 13. As a result, the program:

- Provided financial relief to those struggling to pay fines and fees associated with overdue or lost items;
- Introduced families and neighborhoods to the benefits of leading an active life while also highlighting a broad-based, multilingual collection of books about sports, athletes, teamwork, healthy living, and related topics;
- Reached potential new audiences with a strong awareness campaign focusing on the benefits of youth exercise, a healthy lifestyle, and building brainpower through reading;
- Increased the number of B&ECPL youth library cardholders and promoted the return of youth under the age of 17 who are blocked from borrowing because of circumstances beyond their control, allowing them to participate in the sports equipment lending and to access library resources again;
- Kept youth active through library activities and sports, which is proven to reduce childhood obesity, without the need to purchase sports equipment;
- Promoted the themes “participation in both sports and reading activity contributes to the success of a child’s intellectual, academic and social long-term development,” “participation in sports increases self-esteem, particularly among adolescent girls, and provides advancement opportunities despite gender-related barriers” and “sports build community, aid in conflict resolution and foster mutual understanding and peer support among groups in conflict;” and
- Showcased an expanded public/private/community partnership that benefits the youth in our community.

This program provided a unique opportunity for Library staff to initiate new and creative programming utilizing the sports equipment and books on teambuilding, health and wellness both on-site and off-site. To ensure the pilot’s success, the Library collaborated with key stakeholders in the West Side neighborhood -- the Hispanic Heritage Council, The Belle Center, the World Refugee Day Committee, and the Buffalo Public School System -- to promote these initiatives. Throughout the pilot program, the Isaías González-Soto Branch Library has also shared the equipment with nearby summer camps, public schools and daycare centers. Since the program formally kicked off in July 2019, with initial support from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, sport equipment kits (soccer, lacrosse, and snowshoes) have been borrowed 435 times. Of that number, 260 children (more than half of the total participants) under the age of 17 took advantage of Play Down Your Fines, representing the removal of a total of \$16,500 in fines/fees from their library card accounts. These children would not have been able to borrow the sports equipment (or library materials) had it not been for the Play Down Your Fines youth card amnesty program.

With many families struggling financially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this program has never been more critical. Given the program's early success and renewed support from the Wilson Foundation, the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library plans to expand the program the summer of 2021 to include seven (7) selected additional libraries and the Library’s bookmobile in underserved neighborhoods throughout Erie County, NY. This model program, designed to address many barriers to children fully using libraries to help them prepare for a successful future, is a positive example of the Library helping families and children during this difficult time.

The annual award consists of \$10,000 and a citation of achievement.

The Penguin Random House has also generously funded four runner-up awards consisting of \$1,000 worth of materials for each Library. The runners up are Anaheim Public Mobile Library, California (STEAM Adventures: Explorations on Wheels); Arlington Public Library, Virginia (MyBook Initiative); Lewis County Public Library and Archives, Tennessee (Internet access through HotSpots and equipment); and Queens Public Library, New York (Pandemic-created DJ Series Live).

Members of the 2020 Penguin Random House Award for Innovation Jury are: Chair Sara Dallas, Southern Adirondack Library System, New York; Skip Dye, Penguin Random House, New York; Susan Henricks, Carnegie-Stout Public Library, Iowa; Robin Kear, University of Pittsburgh; and Andrea Lapsley, Texas Library and Archives Foundation.

More information about the Penguin Random House Award for Innovation Award, including how to submit a [nomination](#), is available on the ALA website (www.ala.org).

For more information about the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library System, contact Joy Testa Cinquino at 716-858-7182 or testaj@buffalolib.org. The Library website is: www.BuffaloLib.org.

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