

50 *plus* LIFE

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HAVE BOOKS, WILL TRAVEL



Have Books, Will Travel

By John Crawford

Liz Richardson has always loved books and always wanted to help people, so she knew her career choice from an early age.

“I have always read and was encouraged to find the answers to my own questions,” Richardson said. “I knew from a young child that I wanted to be a librarian.”

A native of Sharpsville, Pennsylvania, now living at Messiah Village, Richardson graduated from Seton Hill College with a Bachelor of the Arts in English and a master’s in library science from the University of Pittsburgh.

Retiring in 2007 did not lessen her desire to help or her love of books; therefore, Richardson decided to bring books to homebound adults at Messiah Village in Mechanicsburg through Cumberland County Library System’s Service to Adult Readers (STAR) program.

Christa Bassett, adult outreach services coordinator for Cumberland County Library System, explained that Richardson participates in STAR’s site-delivery program.

A volunteer like Richardson “selects and delivers to a retirement home, adult daycare, or senior center,” Bassett said. “The Cumberland County library books are housed in a central location at their facility. Currently, we serve 23 active STAR sites across Cumberland County.”

“It’s been about four years that I’ve been doing it,” Richardson said.

Through the program, Richardson gathers books from the Simpson Library in Mechanicsburg and takes them to Messiah Village. This way, seniors unable to get to the library can have access to the collection.

Her task involves going through the collection to find books that interest her fellow residents without repeating previous selections. She sorts among the subjects the homebound seniors enjoy, and then refers to the sign-out card to be sure she hasn’t previously checked out the book.

She will occasionally get a specific request and will do her best to follow through on it.

“The people at Messiah Village are like the people anywhere,” Richardson said. “There are some who don’t want to [read about harder topics], and some who want to think about it. It’s not any different from the community as a whole.

“I keep a list of things that are popular,” she added.

Her role requires considerable insight but not necessarily a set schedule or deadline. The Messiah Village residents know when to expect a new selection.

“They’re not waiting, but if I miss a day or two, they want to know where I’ve been,” she explained with a smile.

Richardson’s work for the residents doesn’t end with the delivery of the Simpson Library books. Concurrent with her STAR duties, she helps to maintain and enlarge the nascent library at the retirement community.

“I have worked there about four years and been the librarian about three,” said Richardson. “Someone is at the library every day for a few hours to check in what has been returned and help people find what they need. Most of the time, readers help themselves.”

Helping the library grow has been a community effort that Richardson helps direct.

“Our library is very small and gets most of our books through donations,” Richardson said. “There also is a small budget to buy books. Last year we received a donation from a resident’s family to buy large-print books.”

Large-print books may be an obvious fit for a senior community, but the

books themselves weren’t, at least not for the after-hours return receptacle. Richardson and the community needed to upgrade the return and managed to do so from within the village.

“I recently designed a new book return, which is being made in the village’s woodshop” by fellow resident Max Van Buskirk, she said. “Our circulation is increasing, and we are getting more large-print books, which are bigger than a normal book.”

STAR also features a homebound delivery program, where a volunteer selects and delivers library items to a single homebound individual.

“Currently, we serve approximately 100 homebound people across Cumberland County with this individualized service,” Bassett said. “This is the type of volunteer service that our volunteer Heidi Stadnicki assists with.”

Massachusetts native Heidi Stadnicki, now of Boiling Springs, has a background similar to Richardson’s, which drew her to the program.

“As a former librarian, I was drawn to STAR as a way to use my skills and give back to others who are unable to visit a library,” said Stadnicki, who delivers books and DVDs to four nursing-home residents and two homebound clients.

“I am thankful for the opportunity to bring pleasure to others in such a simple way.”

Stadnicki works to develop an understanding of her clients’ preferences, much like a site volunteer, but does so on a one-to-one basis. This delivery service provides not only library materials, but also companionship to homebound individuals.

“I enjoy doing reader’s advisory,” said Stadnicki. “Once I am familiar with my clients’ favorite genres and authors, I choose books that I think they will enjoy.

“Learning their preferences involves chatting about the books they have read and why they liked or disliked a particular author,” she said. “This input provides me with valuable insight into making my next selections for each client.”

As she gets familiar with each participant’s preferences, the former librarian enjoys trying to expand their choices.

“It is also fun to introduce new fiction and nonfiction books tailored to a client’s interests or hobbies,” Stadnicki said. “Not every choice is a success, but the challenge makes it enjoyable for me as well.”

“Heidi and Liz both willingly go above and beyond the expectations for STAR volunteers,” Bassett said. “They have a love for the homebound participants we serve and for our program. Our program would not be as vibrant as it currently is without the support of volunteers such as Heidi and Liz.”

The STAR program also includes self-service and digital-only programs. As Bassett explained, the self-service program is “for those Cumberland County residents who are still mobile enough to visit their library but, due to health or other concerns, they may not be able to visit as frequently as necessary.”

The digital-only program is for homebound individuals who strictly want to be able to access from their homes the library system’s electronic databases and the e-book and e-audiobook resources available on its website.

While Bassett will always welcome new volunteers for the STAR program, she really wants to reach more recipients.

“Our greater need, for the moment, is to get the word out about our wonderful program to those homebound individuals who could benefit from it,” she said. “We currently have extra volunteers, but I am looking for homebound participants for these volunteers to serve.”

For more information on the STAR program, contact Bassett at (717) 240-7771 or cbassett@ccpa.net or visit cumberlandcountylibraries.org/STAR.