

I Love My
Librarian!

Nomination for Mary Ellen Pellington

Octavia Fellin Library
Gallup, New Mexico

NOMINATION

John Fortunato

- 1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets him/her apart?**

Mary Ellen Pellington directs a library that is funded by a city of 20,000 residents but services a county of 80,000, of which 75% are Native American. Located in Gallup, New Mexico, the Octavia Fellin Library is the only public library for McKinley County and the Southeast District of the Navajo Nation.

Visionary is probably the best word to describe Mary Ellen. Not believing a library should ever be limited by the economic condition of its region, she aggressively seeks out partnerships and grant opportunities, always striving to meet and exceed the needs of her patrons, who live in the 20th poorest county in the United States.

Mary Ellen feels a library should be a bastion for community, bringing together people, information, and ideas. She believes libraries have the ability to empower people to become more productive and self sufficient. Because of her leadership and untiring outreach, the library grew from 91,867 visits in 2009 to 221,001 visits in 2012. Realizing that a majority of those visitors do not have computers or internet access—some without electricity or running water—she made it a priority to increase the number of public computers and to offer weekly computer classes so technology won't pass our community by.

- 2. Please list a few ways in which the nominee has helped you and made your experience of the library a positive one. For instance, did the nominee inspire in you a love for literature; assist you in a project or finding other information?**

As an aspiring writer and filmmaker, I had much trepidation moving to Gallup. This New Mexican city, situated between the Navajo and Zuni Indian Reservations, is not known

for fiction writing or independent filmmaking, so I felt my move there would surely limit further development of my craft. That may well have been the case had Mary Ellen not come to town. Starting in 2009, when she first arrived, she worked hard to bring writers to Gallup, authors such as Vaunda Nelson, Corretta Scott King Award winner; Mark Rudd, 60's activist and a one-time FBI's Most Wanted; and Pauline Eisenstadt, first woman to serve in the New Mexico House and Senate.

In 2010, Mary Ellen assisted me in establishing Gallup Writers, a fiction writing group. She helped advertise the group, provided space for meetings, and set up writing workshops. As for filmmaking, in 2011, Mary Ellen brought documentarians and Native American filmmakers to Gallup. She expanded the library's video collection and started Library Cinema, a yearlong film series featuring film and filmmaking discussions sponsored by the Gallup Film Foundation.

I am a father of three young girls: two, three, and eight—the ages when the library is that magical place where dreams and adventure abound. And over the last several years, I have learned just how important children are to Mary Ellen and her vision for the library. She sees our young as not only as visitors, but as future literary contributors. She instills the idea of storytelling in children by giving impromptu story-times to any child that wanders into her office. She always has small picture books, flannel story boards, and puppets in arm's reach.

The Octavia Fellin Library has a standalone children's branch that actively seeks new and innovating programs. Getting kids and teenagers excited about the library is not easy. Mary Ellen brought to town a professional youth services librarian (the first in Gallup) to guide and excites kids and teens alike. The children's branch has an annual community carnival, reading clubs, story times, visiting authors, magic shows, game times, guest speakers, performers, public computers, video games, craft programs, and an annual teen film festival. In 2012, Mary Ellen brought astronaut, Harrison Schmidt, the last man to walk on the moon, to the library to tell the children of our community that they too could reach for the stars.

3. How has the librarian made a difference in the community? Please be specific.

Mary Ellen has built an environment that is welcoming to all, and inclusive of all the cultures and ethnicities in the region, which is known as the “Indian Capital of the World.” The library is now a place where community members come together to discuss issues, share ideas, develop talents, and explore new interests. Every visitor receives a smile and an offer of help.

Adept at making friends and forming partnerships with community organizations, Mary Ellen quickly established relations with the Gallup Film Foundation, Retired Seniors Volunteer Program, Celtic Festival Organization, Zuni Tribal Library, Navajo Historical Commission, University of New Mexico, McKinley County School District, NAACP, Chamber of Commerce, Veterans Affairs, Code Talkers Association, Gallup Arts Council, and Gallup Writers. Being in Gallup for less than four years has not stopped her from becoming part of the community. She is on the Rotary Club Board, the Lions Club

Board, and a member of the Elks Club. She was also the keynote speaker for the 2011 Dr. Martin Luther King Community Commemoration. I should offer a word of warning to anyone that might decide to walk down the street with Mary Ellen Pellington. You may never reach your destination because so many people will stop her to talk.

McKinley is the poorest county in New Mexico, but one of the richest in library services. Over the past few years, Mary Ellen established self checkout, user printing, wireless internet, and upgraded all of the library's public computers. She's hired a professional reference librarian to offer patrons professional reference services, which went from none reported in 2009 to 2,925 in 2012. Adult focused programs grew from 2 in 2009 to 103 in 2012. During that same time, public computer users grew by 10,000.

Mary Ellen's mantra is "Diversity and Inclusion." She strives to meet the needs of the entire community. But to understand what that means, you have to understand the population of McKinley County. Here are some statistics that speak to our county's diversity and uniqueness:

Population	71,492
American Indian	74.7%
Hispanic	14.6%
All others	10.7%
Bachelor degree or higher	10.9%
Persons below poverty level	33.4%
Per capita income	\$12,932

McKinley County is one of only three counties where neither English nor Spanish is the most common languages spoken. Here you will find 45.8% of the people speaking Navajo at home, and another 10% speaking Zuni.

Statistics for McKinley County calculate unemployment at 70%, a staggering number and a staggering problem. Can a library do anything about that? Mary Ellen thought so. She partnered with the Chamber of Commerce, the Small Business Association, and the University of New Mexico-Gallup Campus to bring job training and marketing (social-media) workshops to the library. She also updated the library's business and business reference collections. Knowing that most of the residents in the region derive their income from selling Native American arts and crafts, Mary Ellen hosted numerous craft workshops on weaving, soap making, quilting, candle making, aromatherapy, knitting, card making, and silversmithing.

Mary Ellen's library philosophy is "Free and open access to all." And by that, she means that all of the services and events and workshops that the Octavia Fellin Library offers are free to the public, a gesture well appreciated by the 20th poorest county in the nation.

4. How has the library, and the nominee, improved the quality of your life?

As a father, my first responsibility is to my children. And like countless other parents, my goal is see them achieve and be happy. McKinley County schools are ranked 64 out of 74

districts in New Mexico; to a parent that means having to do more outside the school to educate your child.

Home and school are typically the places that prepare children for life and give them the skills and experiences to succeed. I can honestly say that Mary Ellen is working diligently to make the Octavia Fellin Library a viable tributary to a child's education. Through countless programs and creative activities like teen film festivals, poetry writing contests, and college funding workshops, Mary Ellen and her staff are stimulating the youth of our community, providing them wonderful experiences and invaluable information that will likely transform them into responsible and productive adults.

As to how the library directly improved my own quality of life, I must talk about my filmmaking interests. When I left New York City in 2009 to come to Gallup, I was afraid that I was leaving behind so much in the way of developing this interest. I figured I would have little opportunity to make films in Gallup. I am happy to report that Mary Ellen is making sure that does not happen. She recognized the deep roots that Gallup has to Hollywood, going back to early cinema when Tinseltown would send out their best actors and directors to produce westerns here. She started a collection of Gallup-Made films to preserve that history. She also started the Library Film Series, which showcases films and offers film appreciation discussions. To help a growing body of local filmmakers, Mary Ellen began hosting filmmaking workshops.

For me, the Octavia Fellin Library has transformed from what I first thought of as a simple book lending institution to a community focused educational center—and friendship hall.

5. How does the nominee make the library a better place?

Mary Ellen raised the standard of service at the Octavia Fellin Library by hiring two experienced library science professionals. During a time of municipal cutbacks, she successfully increased the library budget each year. This year, she acquired funding for a study to build a new state-of-the-art library building in Gallup.

Librarian one day, curator the next. The Octavia Fellin Library is home to one of the largest southwest art collections in the region. Mary Ellen protects and preserves these cultural treasures. She also developed a massive southwest and Native American materials collection that attracts researchers from around the country, and as far away as Germany and Australia. More recently, she began building an archive for the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial, which is the largest and oldest Native American gathering in the nation. Her goal is to preserve these materials for researchers and future generations. Another way she is bringing the library into the 21st century is through an aggressive digitizing program to archive photographs and other historically significant documents.

In Mary Ellen's opinion, a library should extend well beyond its four walls and checkout counter. In today's world, a library has to go out and grab future patrons by their imaginations. Yes, that means partnerships. But it also means holding events outside the

library, events like local film premiers, carnivals, film festivals, outreach to schools, day care centers, and senior centers.

As President-elect for the New Mexico Library Association, Mary Ellen is helping to guide the future of libraries throughout New Mexico. And because I view her as such a strong leader and someone who is passionate and can inspire others, I believe the prospective for those institutions is promising and exciting—perhaps as exciting as Octavia Fellin Library's