

The Importance of Libraries

Laura Henry-Allain

I have always loved libraries. Let me tell you why.

During my early years and throughout my time at primary school, I was incredibly shy. My local library became my oasis, a place where I could read books and feel as if I were actually part of the stories I was reading.

I was raised in North Kensington in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. As well as Kensal Library, I remember visiting the local mobile library and I would sometimes venture as far as North Kensington Library, which had a larger children's selection (it still does!).

Two or three times a week, my siblings and I would visit the library and borrow as many books as we were each allowed. We would walk there and then walk home, often reading the books along the way. We would read our own library books and then swap with each other.

Even as a teenager (after I had finally found my voice!), the library was still a place I would visit frequently. I am dyslexic and many people are perplexed by my love of reading; it is important to note that every dyslexic person is different. To this day, I still love the buzz of a library and the sensory explosion of holding a physical book.

I am forever grateful to those libraries for fostering my love of reading. I would say that libraries are a vital resource for the whole community, especially for many families like ours, who were and are on a low income.

Joseph Coelho, the current Waterstones Children's Laureate, remarked on the impact that libraries had on him: as well as using them as places in which to do homework and access books, one of his first jobs as a teenager was in his local library in south London. Part of his role as Children's Laureate is to undertake a Library Marathon, in which he will become a member of a library in every local authority in the UK. Wow, and well done Joseph for shining a spotlight on libraries.

I often visit libraries in my role as a storyteller – sharing stories and delivering workshops with children and young people. An inspirational school visit from ‘the late great’ Jamaican poet Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze gave Joseph Coelho the green light and made him realise that he could be a writer too, and ultimately sparked his career as a poet and picture-book author.

I was fortunate recently to visit the island of Grenada and to be invited to their Community Library. I reflected that reading shouldn’t be out of reach for children. It is so important that every child experiences the magic of books, which libraries make available, and is given every opportunity to develop a lifelong love of reading. Every child, irrespective of stage, age and ability should have that opportunity.

I often hear from librarians that, since the pandemic, visitor numbers have dropped. On my travels, I share the importance of libraries with children and their parents, and ask them if they know where their local library is. It’s a sad fact that some children do not have a library within walking distance, which in many cases is due to closures. It worries me that it will be much harder for some children to access books and develop a love of reading.

There should be no closure of libraries. In fact, we need more libraries to open within ‘pram-pushing’ distance. This is where mobile libraries can be so valuable,

with visiting times reflecting community needs, for example, after school. Local authority budgets need to increase and be ringfenced so that libraries can purchase a variety of diverse books that will support children's developing curiosity and lay the foundation for their future literacy skills.

A few years ago, South Norwood Library, in the London Borough of Croydon, was threatened with closure. This was my local library for 10 years. I shared my love of reading with my sons, and we would often visit the library for story sessions, Rhyme Time and author visits. They always took part with a competitive spirit in the summer reading challenge!

Naturally, I signed the petition against closing the library. I also attended a gathering where I spoke about the value of libraries in general, for example, supporting children to be readers for life, children doing their homework, individuals reading newspapers, and carrying out research. I was delighted when Croydon Council reversed its decision to close the library. This demonstrates the power that local communities can have when they come together for a joint purpose, such as keeping literacy alive in a local library.

Fast forward to 2023, when libraries are not only being used for literary purposes, but also as a warm space as the cost-of-living crisis and the rise in fuel costs mean that many individuals can no longer afford to heat their homes. There are libraries that have regular legal advice sessions through organisations such as Citizens Advice, while some have adult education services and others have food banks.

Early in 2022, in another great example of how libraries are not just there to lend books, I saw a call to action on Twitter from Eddie Nestor, a presenter on BBC Radio London. He retweeted an appeal from the Grenfell Memorial Quilt group, who had to vacate their current weekly space and were looking for a new home. I immediately thought of North Kensington Library.

I connected the 'artist' and founder of the Grenfell Memorial Quilt, Tuesday Greenidge, with Fiona Monks from the library service. It was an instant yes and the Grenfell Memorial Quilt group were able to use the library on a weekly basis, including storage space for their materials and equipment. Grenfell Tower is a local landmark visible from the library. It was incredibly important that the Grenfell Memorial Project remained in the heart of the community.

Tuesday's daughter is a survivor of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. Tuesday combined her creative skills and activism to start sewing a memorial quilt and, more importantly, to bring the community together using creativity to support mental health and well-being through weekly talking and sewing sessions.

The group's slogan is '*Sewing for Justice*' and the aim is to keep sewing until the length of the quilt is equal to the height of the tower – more than 220 feet (67 metres). The quilt is currently 72 feet (30 metres) long, which is the width of the tower. The Grenfell Memorial Quilt has received generous support locally, nationally and globally, with donations of materials and equipment as well as the commitment of the individuals sewing the quilt panels.

The department store John Lewis kindly donated sewing machines, fabric and thread as part of their community outreach work. This is a great example of where business, community groups and libraries can positively work together for the benefit of the community.

I pop in on occasions and it fills my heart with joy to see individuals from the community dropping off materials, sewing and talking. Even more refreshing is to see the stitchers borrowing books; making excellent use of their time and the library's resources.

'Libraries,' says Tuesday, 'have always been a space where it feels almost sacred to me. A space where past and present, future and the now can be accessed by the community through the written word. Enriching as that already is, my local library, North Kensington, has also become a space where a community fabric art project comes together to sew for justice the 220 foot Grenfell Memorial Quilt, which I myself initiated.'

If I think back to when I was a child, when we walked to the library and were only allowed to borrow four books, it makes me realise how technology now plays a big part in libraries. If you live, work or study in a particular local authority, you can have remote access to online resources and digital collections – for research, local records, audio books, electronic newspapers, and the media.

This is wonderful for those who are physically unable to access their local library. I am mindful that not everyone can afford to have Wi-Fi at home and, in some areas, Wi-Fi coverage can be an issue. When I tell others all the things it's possible to access from a library, people are often surprised, especially by the added bonus that it's all free!

I believe that we need more joined-up thinking, for instance, with the health sector: midwives or health visitors could gift new parents a library card for their new-born, and perhaps offer information on local library services. Annual local library outreach events at parks, festivals, schools, Early Years settings and community venues can all raise the profile of libraries in the community.

This would, of course, mean ongoing financial investment, which I believe would be money well spent as an investment in children's lifelong literacy. And it would guarantee that libraries remain a focal point within the community and not simply a piece of vanished history.

This piece was written in April 2023 and may not reflect updated research.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

© Laura Henry-Allain