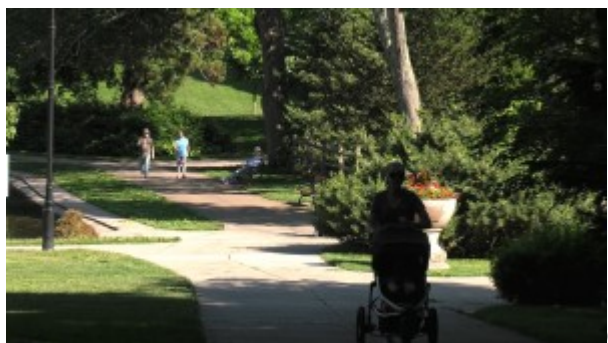


Rhode Island Spotlight: Westerly Library



On one of the prettiest afternoons of the summer, more than a dozen children gathered under a sprawling magnolia tree for a program called Art in the Park. The setting: Wilcox Park in the heart of downtown Westerly, a 15-acre oasis that hosted dozens of programs and community events over the course of the summer.

At the southern edge of the park is Westerly Library, founded in 1892. Together, the library and the park have been a focal point — and a resource — for Westerly and surrounding communities for



more than a century. What many don't know is that the two entities are privately held: Only 25% of the operating budget comes from the town of Westerly and neighboring Stonington, Connecticut. The rest comes from an endowment, grants and donations.

"Most libraries are municipal libraries, some have private portions to them, so they may have associations attached," said the library's executive director, Brigitte Hopkins. "But they're not completely private, so we're fairly unique in Rhode Island."

It began in the late 1800s when Stephen Wilcox, a local business owner and inventor, stepped in to provide seed money for a local library. His contribution, matched with community donations, was a precursor of what was to come over the next 125 years. What you see today — in the library and throughout the park — is the result of that generosity. The main building has undergone a series of additions and renovations that creates unique spaces inside, from reading areas and a computer room to an art gallery with rotating exhibits upstairs and a teen room that was formerly a book storage area — plus a third-floor terrace room with an outside deck. Over the past century, the building has grown to more than 50,000 square feet.

The number of programs and events in the library and park has increased significantly since Hopkins took over as director three and a half years ago. We saw numerous children's programs, a weekend folk festival in July and preparations for a Shakespeare in the Park series in August.

"It's great that we can provide a venue, or host programs, because we have this space so we can

connect these programs or events and our community members,” Hopkins said.

Everywhere you look, there is history, including a century-old gazebo-like bandstand that just underwent a major renovation and hosts scores of weddings every year. Across the way is the park cottage, also a century old, where caretakers used to live, with a prime view of a pond and fountain.



Back at the library, visitors who come in the front door will see a calendar of events to the left, changing from week to week, and a huge plaque to the right with a list of donors that is a testament to the community’s support.

“We’ve been very fortunate to have people in our community and region who donate to the library,” Algiere said. “It is a private library and the park is private, open to the public, it’s a unique situation. And we’re very fortunate to have people in the community who recognize that and donate their time and their money.”

We asked Hopkins what makes Westerly different from other places she’s worked.

“The community,” she said, without hesitation. “I think it’s the community; the staff (is) great, but the community, I think, really feeds our dedication and our enthusiasm about working here. There’s such pride the community holds for the institution, and you can feel it walking in. And, I think, because the community supports us we’re excited to be here.”

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