

Spotlight Award

Ohio library manager Blair Tom is recognized for service to community

BookPage has announced that Blair Tom of the John McIntire Library in Zanesville, Ohio, is the winner of its first annual Spotlight Award for Public Librarians. Tom was chosen from almost 2,000 library employees nominated by grateful public library patrons across the country.

The Spotlight Award was launched to honor librarians for their quiet efforts to make life better for their patrons and their communities—librarians who “never seek the spotlight, but certainly deserve it.” Judging from the overwhelming response to the contest, many library users deeply appreciate the personal commitment and resourcefulness shown by librarians in their hometowns.

Shortly after plans for the award were announced in February, nominations began pouring in from library patrons across the country. By the May 15 deadline for nominations, BookPage had received 1,898 entries from 48 states, all with glowing praise for those who work in public libraries. Patrons applauded librarians in their local communities who personally delivered books to disabled and elderly readers, who raised funds to build new libraries, who unselfishly mentored their co-workers and who shared their love of books and reading with everyone they encountered.

Blair Tom, who serves as manager of customer service and public relations for the Muskingum County Library System, said he was excited and humbled by the “distinct honor” of being the first Spotlight Award winner. “I wasn’t even aware of the fact that I had been nominated, so it’s really quite

wonderful,” said Tom, who will receive \$2,500 as part of his recognition. The Muskingum County Library System, which Tom represents, will receive \$250, and Alice Graham, who nominated Tom, will receive \$100.

A 15-year veteran of the Muskingum system,



Blair Tom, manager of customer service and PR for the Muskingum County Library System in Ohio, was described in his nomination as “an articulate and positive spokesperson [who] tirelessly works to put the MCLS and its programs first in the minds of residents and community leaders.”

Tom said working at the library “is probably the best happy coincidence that ever occurred in my life. I never imagined this as a career for myself, but it has taken me down a wonderful path and given me many new opportunities.” In addition to his duties in public relations, Tom manages the children’s department, the reference department and the circulation department, as well as coordinating systemwide programming.

In her nomination, Graham praised Tom’s “extraordinary” dedication to his job and his tireless efforts to create and manage library programs for the community. “Quietly and tactfully, he models exquisite customer service and coaches and encourages his employees to reach their full potential,” the nomination noted. Graham, who serves on the library’s board and is a past president of the board as well as a frequent library patron, cited Tom’s development of popular summer reading programs, his creation of a Learning Center in partnership with the local

Rotary Club, the launch of a successful Friends of the Library bookstore, and many other projects as evidence of his vital role at the library. “Not only did he recruit and train the all-volunteer team which operates the bookstore, he works to keep it well advertised and running smoothly, to the benefit of library programming: the bookstore earns about \$16,000 annually,” Graham wrote. In cooperation with the county Chamber of Commerce, Tom also helped to develop a Passport Program that has encouraged many parents, grandparents and children to visit local attractions and have their passports stamped. “This program has been so successful that surrounding counties have contacted Blair to learn how they might establish a similar passport program,” the nomination reported.

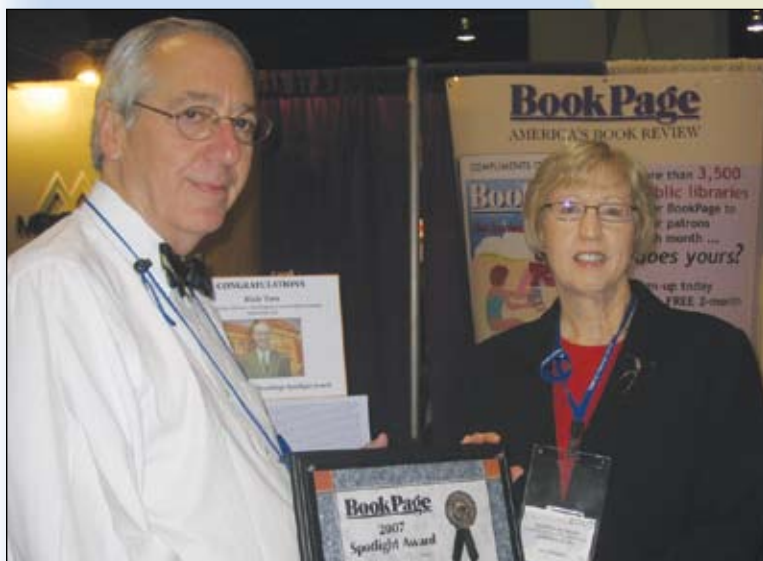
Graham, who said she was “literally jumping up and down” after hearing the news that Tom had won the award, describes him as humble person “who is willing to do all the work behind the scenes and let someone else take it and run with it. BookPage really chose a great example of someone who can make things work but take no glory.”

The Muskingum County Library is a mid-size system with a main library in Zanesville, housed in a historic Carnegie building, and five branch libraries. Tom grew up in the area, located east of Columbus on the fringes of Appalachia, and says he “always enjoyed the library. It has been a really positive part of my life.”

He finds that in Zanesville today, “the library is a part of our community that people are very proud of—not just the Carnegie building, but what it represents.” The Spotlight Award winner said he feels fortunate working in a smaller system, “where we can have a more direct impact on individual lives and make a difference partnering with community businesses and organizations.” He sees the primary role of any public library as “breaking down the barriers between the haves and the have-nots” and believes that new technologies have enhanced librarians’ abilities to work toward that goal. “I think technology has expanded our role—and refocused it in many instances—but added many opportunities and challenges to what we do,” he said.

As someone who isn’t used to being in the spotlight, Tom says he is “still trying to wrap my mind around the concept” that others appreciate his work. “I think it’s wonderful that BookPage gave library customers the opportunity to stand back and say, ‘I really value what these people do for me every day.’ Most people in libraries do it because they believe it’s really important work and it matters. But it’s wonderful to get this kind of recognition.”

Following its successful launch this year, the Spotlight Award will be presented annually. ♡



Muskingum County Library System director Sondra L. Plymire (right) receives the Spotlight Award on Blair Tom’s behalf from BookPage Publisher Michael Zibart. The presentation was made at the American Library Association annual conference in Washington, D.C.