

I discovered the Ridgewood Public Library during the summer of 2005, just after lunch. My family was new to Ho-Ho-Kus, so we were still in the process of thoroughly exploring our town and the neighboring districts. My dad still thought that the Ho-Ho-Kus Inn was an actual inn, and I had yet to start my first year of school in America. So I was practically vibrating with excitement as we walked the long, flat stairs that led to the library entrance, as a five year old in a new place tends to be. And once we made our way past the little café in the lobby, past the checkout counter and the wooden tutoring tables, and into the children's section?

It was like heaven, if heaven was four different copies of If You Give A Mouse A Cookie, six bazillion issues of National Geographic KIDS, the entire Warrior Cats series, and a fish tank.

I went back to that library every single Saturday, for almost six years. Every week, my dad would grab this one canvas bag we had in the coat closet, my little sister and I would clamber into our 2001 tan Toyota Corolla, and we would head over to Ridgewood. My dad, who was itching for a way to practice his English and entertain his kids, found the perfect solution in reading new books to us every night. And I, who was itching for adventure, loved listening to stories as much as how Winnie the Pooh loved his honey. These books sparked my early fascination with the intricacies of storytelling and the English language. And my love for reading continued as I moved on to the Young Adult section, only with more angst-ridden romance, implausible drama, and incomprehensible plot points mixed in.

Today, I still read books religiously; Terry Pratchett is my favorite author, and I've exhausted the supply of his books in every local library within my grasp. I've also come to love writing and English above all else. I've taken Creative Writing at Northern Highlands for two years, been an editor of the Literary Magazine for three years, and an editor of the school newspaper for two. I will pursue English in college, and never stop writing and reading. I believe

that books are an irreplaceable method of spreading ideas and opinions and insights and facts, while also allowing room for beautiful language, emotionally-charged passages, and pure, unfiltered comedy to reach new audiences. None of my love for literature would have been possible, if not for the libraries that let five-year-old me enter the world of the words.

But libraries also gave me something else, outside of a passion for writing. As I continued visiting the library throughout my childhood, I started getting more and more involved in the different activities hosted every month. Sometimes I would drag my dad out to let me see a movie at Ridgewood, sometimes I'd run across town for story time in Ho-Ho-Kus. I realized that libraries act as community centers, invaluable opportunities for people in an area to meet and spend time with each other. As the new kid in a new town, a new state, a new country, this feature of libraries helped me open up and feel less alone. Extremely not alone, as the library staff and the other children would always make sure I knew that I was welcome. I loved being able to watch Harry Potter take on the Chamber of Secrets with an army of fellow fans from the floor of Ridgewood's amphitheater. I could love what I loved, and know that there was a place where people with similar interests would belong.

When I volunteered over the summer at the Ho-Ho-Kus Library, I realized that this aspect of Libraries hasn't changed in the slightest. As I helped kindergarteners make animal masks or turn paper bags into fantasy characters, I saw that this was a place where kids can still get together. They would get so excited about seeing their friends at our weekly craft sessions, or they would talk endlessly of bringing someone they knew on our Pokémon Go walks. They came in droves for movie night, and spent afternoons after summer camp flipping through picture books. They would be so enthusiastic about coming back to the library. And, and just like me, they would fall in love with books every time they walked through those doors.