50 Years of the West Islip Public Library

The West Islip Public Library has its roots in the great boom in suburban development that marked the post-war period of the 1950s on Long Island. West Islip was transformed from a sparsely populated area of old estates and farms to a bustling community during this decade. In the mid-1950s the community began to develop and the population grew rapidly. The need for a true library in West Islip was the main topic of a Secatogue School PTA meeting in November, 1954. Up till then, the community's "library" was a shelf of books in the Higbie Lane School principal's office which adults could borrow. Early support was strong, and planning began in earnest, but it would be almost three years before those plans were realized.

43 Hawley Avenue

When the community failed to approve using tax funds for a library, a number of dedicated people joined together to plan a library that would be supported by membership dues and private donations but open to the public. Local attorneys Edward Flower and Arthur Babbitz prepared the original application, and the West Islip Library Association was chartered by the New York State Board of Regents in 1956. The Founding Trustees were Grace T. Lindenberg, Gloria Van Caeseele, Martha Limberg, Astrid Pulver, John S. Steele, Ridgeway T. Haggerty, and Arthur Babbitz.. Association membership dues would be $2.00 per year for each person, but every resident of West Islip would be entitled to full free use of the library.

Volunteers raised funds, collected donated filing cabinets and other equipment, and renovated a building on Hawley Avenue, donated by William Dzus, a local industrialist. They also visited nearly every home in the community to present a library card and information packet to residents. Proceeds from a paper drive and other fundraisers helped to buy necessary furniture and supplies. Many volunteers, including local Scout Troops, helped to collect donated books, while other workers sorted, cleaned and arranged these donations. Volunteer librarians and staff from Bayshore Library and Babylon High School helped to catalog the new collection.

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On May 18th, 1957, dedication ceremonies were held and the founding trustees welcomed West Islip residents to the new library. There were 3218 volumes and 272 registered borrowers, and it would be open 12 hours each week; staffed completely by volunteers until Julia Sullivan was appointed librarian in October 1957. By then the collection had grown to over 5000 books, including 1000 of which were on loan from the NY State Traveling Library, and the 1100th borrower was registered.

The community responded enthusiastically and the young library was heavily used from the start, with a circulation of 38,000 books the first year. It wasn't long before the tiny building was hopelessly overcrowded.

In March 1959, Joy Meisels was appointed Library Director, and a small renovation took place. Now open 36 hours each week, and with 3,352 registered borrowers, the library was growing steadily. By 1960, the hours were even longer, borrowers had doubled, and the library offered some records, pamphlets, film programs and book discussion groups. A nearby building at 37 Hawley Avenue was rented for use as a separate children's library, but that only gave temporary relief. The Board of Trustees realized that the patron inconvenience caused by the use of two separate buildings, and the complete lack of parking made it imperative to look for larger quarters.

545 Union Boulevard

By 1961 the community had approved the change to a tax-supported public library. The West Islip Library Association was dissolved and the West Islip Public Library was chartered in its place.

Two empty stores in the Captree Shopping Center on Union Boulevard were rented in late 1961 as a temporary home while plans were forming for a new permanent library site. This more than doubled the available library space.

Within a year of this move, services to patrons were expanded and a children's librarian, Darline Carter, was appointed. By the end of 1963, circulation had grown to more than 161,000 and almost 11,000 residents had library cards. There were over 25,000 volumes on the shelves.

In 1964, the Library board decided to use part of the funds from the sale of the Hawley Avenue building to experiment with a bus service. It was an immediate success. With their library cards serving as bus passes, West Islip residents who had formerly found the library's location too remote, now flocked to its doors. Unfortunately, the service had to be discontinued the next year when the library budget was defeated.

The plans for a library building program were finalized and on February 26, 1966, voters approved a plan to construct a new 20,000 square foot building, tripling the library space, with room for 105,000 books, meeting space for 250 people, and parking for 75 cars.

3 Higbie Lane

The site selected was on school district property, part of the Wagstaff Estate at the junction of Higbie Lane and Montauk Highway. The new building would be erected on almost the exact spot where the main house once stood.

Groundbreaking ceremonies took place in February 1967, and the new state of the art library opened to the community in May 1968. In 1969, Joy Meisels retired and Darline Carter was appointed Library Director. The library began a period of vitality and growth, as she continued to serve for another 30 years.

Volunteers have continued to play a large role at the Library, especially through activities sponsored by the Friends of the Library. While the founding 'Friends' group which first met in June 1954 was concerned primarily with the formation of the library itself, a second group with a new focus was formed September 27, 1961. Local residents were invited to this first meeting at which plans were made for a group that would supplement library services by sponsoring special projects, such as adding a record collection to the library's holdings and a scholarship fund. Through the years, they have continued to offer art shows, book fairs, bus trips, and more to the community. They sponsor programs such as concerts, book discussion groups, museum exhibits, etc. They have made many equipment purchases, including a piano, computers for patrons to use, and projectors. For several years, they staffed Bookmobiles that West Islip shared with other local libraries.

By 1977, it was again apparent that more room was needed. The original building plans included provision for internal expansion--a mezzanine. With little interruption in library services, a mezzanine along the south side of the Adult Room was constructed over a six week period. The extra space opened up the formerly-crowded areas, and provided room for the continued growth of the library's collection.

In 1982 the West Islip Community came together to celebrate the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the library with a month-long series of arts and humanities activities that involved many organizations and institutions in the community. By that point the library's collection had grown to over 115,000 volumes, and was considered one of the premier libraries in the area.

The 1980s also saw a trend that has continued to this day, not only in libraries, but in all aspects of daily life. Public libraries in Suffolk County were becoming automated, first using computers to keep track of circulation of materials, and gradually shifting from the time honored card catalog to the computer screen to locate materials.

After several years of research, negotiation, and planning, the library joined together in 1986 with other Suffolk County public libraries to form the CLSI library automation consortium.

It took library staff and volunteers from the Friends of the Library many months to complete the massive job of barcoding and entering data on the tens of thousands of items in the collection, but the result was a tremendous increase in speed and efficiency in the location and circulation of materials.

By the early 1990s it was realized that space for the library's growing collection of materials was becoming a problem, particularly with the growing popularity of audio visual materials. A second internal expansion project was completed in 1995 that extended the upper level bookstacks along the east wall of the Adult Room, giving the mezzanine its current configuration.

The pace of library automation increased dramatically in the 90s, with the revolution in personal computer use and the explosion of the Internet completely transforming the way people access information. Public libraries became community centers for information technology in addition to their more traditional roles. West Islip Public Library boasted the first public library webpage in Suffolk County as early as 1995, and soon was providing library users access to information on a 24/7 basis via its website and its participation in the county-wide SuffolkNet Internet access program. Public access computer workstations were installed for patrons, and training in the use of computers and the Internet began, both on an individual basis & through computer user groups at the library.

The gradual aging of the library building, the lack of space caused by the massive influx of technology, the steadily growing collections, and the changing needs and expectations of library users all caused the library administration to begin planning for renovation and expansion of the building in the late 1990s. After an initial proposal failed to win approval of the public, a second, scaled-down plan was passed in 2000 and construction of an 11,000 square foot addition and a complete renovation of the building began.

The year 2000 also saw the appointment of the current Library Director, Andrew Hamm, after the retirement of Darline Carter, who had served the library so brilliantly for 37 of its 50 years.

Completed in 2004, the expansion plan gave the library a completely new Children's Room as well as significantly expanded Adult and Meeting Room facililties.

Today the library is employing advances in information technology to better serve the users. Wireless Internet access is available to library patrons within the building, and patrons can download digital media directly to their home computers and browse scholarly database collections from home. Most importantly, we are focusing on improving cooperation and coordination with the other 55 public libraries of Suffolk County to leverage supporters' library tax dollars. Advances in resource sharing technology allows West Islip residents not only to look up and make selections from among the 200,000 plus items in the building's collection, but from among the 8.8 million items held by Suffolk County public libraries. As we go forward into the next 50 years, the West Islip Public Library will continue to be your place for books....and a whole lot more!