

# PRESTIGIOUS HONOUR FOR CHIEF LIBRARIAN'S INNOVATION

## WILLIAMS' QUEST MILTON APP RECOGNIZED WITH NORTH AMERICAN JOHN ILIFF AWARD

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In 2016, legions of gaming enthusiasts began hunting down virtual reality characters as part of the Pokemon Go phenomenon.

Mark Williams was not among them.

"I hated it," the chief librarian of Milton Public Library (MPL) said bluntly.

Still, a certain respect and appreciation for what he called the best aspect of the uber-popular invention — geocaching — quickly set in.

And inspiration soon followed.

The result? The Quest Milton app — an immersive community-based game that was recently recognized with the American Public Library Association's John Iliff Award for innovation.

"Being British, I don't get all 'woo hoo.' But internally I'm very excited," said Williams, who envisioned and developed the award-winning app and worked with a tech team led by Mark Shannelly to bring it to fruition a little over a year ago. "When you think it's only awarded to one library a year and this is only the second time it's

**"It was a positive sign of what libraries can be."**

**-Mark Williams, library chief**

been outside the U.S., it's a pretty good thing."

With a number of community partners like Conservation Halton and the Town of Milton on board, in addition to the library, Quest Milton invites residents to explore their community parks, landmarks and facilities via memory and swimming challenges — among other games.

Tokens are collected that can be redeemed for such things as free swims or having one's library fines waived.

Although Williams doesn't consider himself especially tech-savvy, he saw the app as another way of technology helping to further break down barriers to accessing libraries.

And when the project received one of just 10 grants from the Ontario Tourism, Culture and Sport and the Ontario Libraries Capacity Fund in 2016, his encouragement

grew.

"That (grant approval) in itself was a shot in the arm."

This isn't the first time a library grant made a memorable impact on the MPL chief librarian, who originally studied to be a lawyer in his native England.

When aspirations of that career path faded, Williams found himself working in a bar — where one of its regulars happened to be a librarian who wound up recruiting him for a soon-to-be-funded outreach education program for troubled youth.

It wasn't long before this work expanded to immigrants, and thus a future in library services had taken shape.

"It was a positive sign of what libraries can be," said Williams, who'll join his Quest Milton development crew in Washington, D.C., in June for the official acceptance of the John Iliff Award. "I'm a big believer that you make your own fate."

The library chief notes that although Quest Milton's numbers aren't exactly huge — with roughly 600 people using it each month — the app can be considered a success from one concrete perspective. Of the roughly 1,000 Miltonians who've tried it out, about 60 per cent are using it regularly. That's six times the retention rate of



Nikki Wesley / Metroland

Chief Librarian Mark Williams was recently honoured with a North American innovation award for his Quest Milton app.

what's considered to make the average app successful.

The John Iliff Award jury chair wrote: "The committee was impressed not just with the app itself but what you were able to do in bringing together a wide array of partners and creating something that is fun and also helps people get to know the community and library better. The app

would be impressive coming from a library of any size, and knowing that you pulled it together with a smaller budget and resources makes it all the better."

While noting that traditional library services remain MPL's bread and butter, Williams keeps innovation at the forefront of his everyday operations.

However ...

"We invest in technology if it's meaningful, not just because it's the next fad," he said.

The John Iliff Award helps highlight a memorable 2019 for Williams, with this summer marking his first anniversary as the library's chief and a third MPL branch added to the mix in the fall.

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