

# Burlington Public Library CEO Maureen Barry retiring

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In 2005, Burlington Central Library was under construction, the New Street building surrounded by protective fencing, mounds of excavated dirt and obtrusive steel rebars.

Yet a few diehard library patrons would push away fences, crawl over dirt piles and walk through grounds that resembled a "bombed out zone" in an effort to reach the building, despite blown out concrete walls.

When the library reopened, a regular patron, supported by his walker and sporting a tie, walked in clutching three books he had borrowed before the months-long shutdown.

"He thought the library looked so much more beautiful now, he couldn't just walk over here with a T-shirt, and because he was going to see his library staff again, he needed to put on a tie," recalled BPL CEO Maureen Barry with a smile.

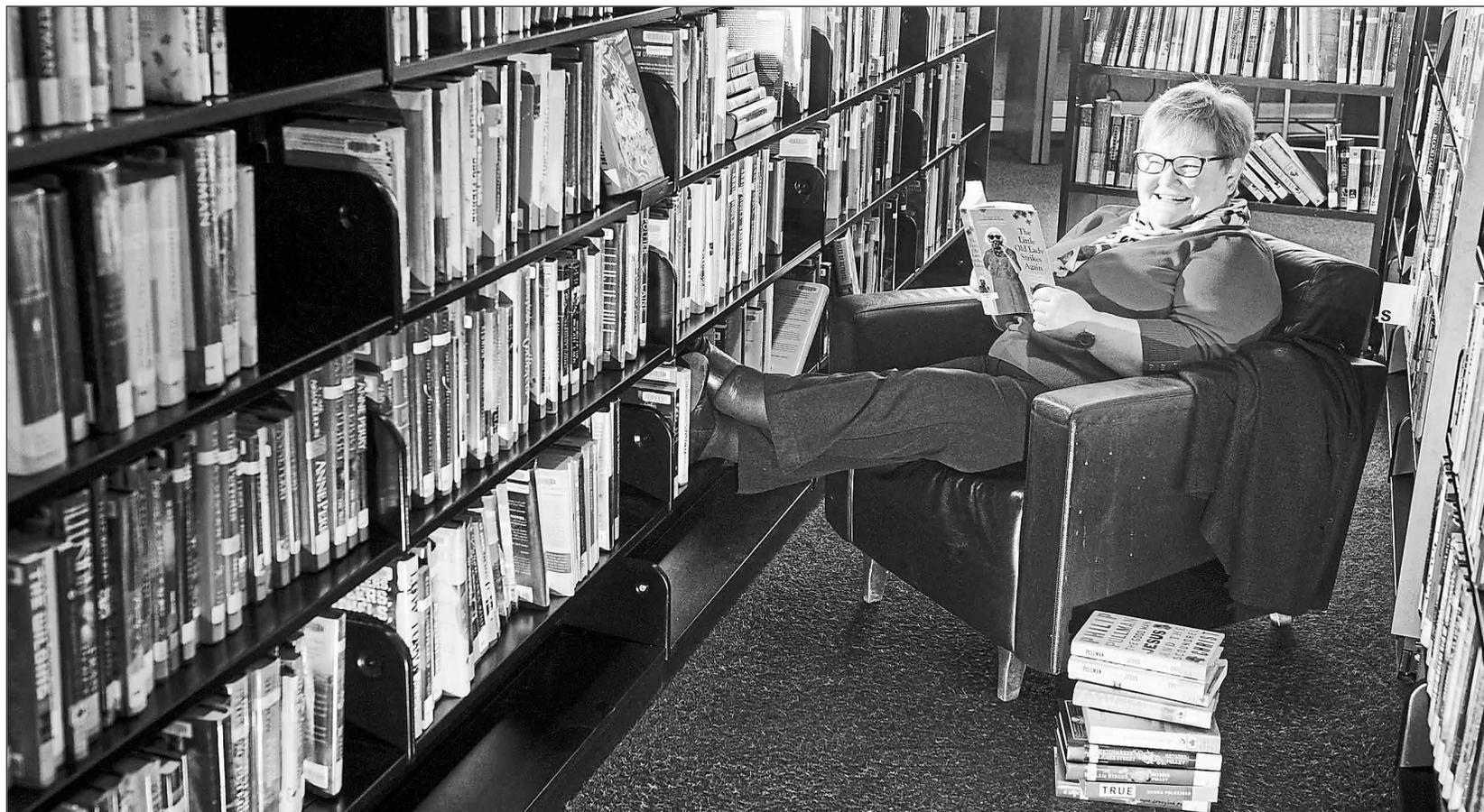
Whether it's to borrow a book, attend a financial literacy program, view an aquaponic garden, read a Syrian newspaper, study for exams, 'borrow' seeds or escape isolation, the library means different things to different people.

Nowhere has the evolution of libraries into vibrant community hubs become more apparent than in Burlington, under the leadership of its retiring CEO, who oversaw 200 employees in seven locations and an annual budget of \$11 million.

With Barry at its helm since 2009, the library has been honoured for innovative practices, compassionate community services and economic contributions to the city as evidenced by numerous awards and accolades.

BPL is Barry's legacy to the city, said library board chair Nancy Douglas.

"It is a testament to her passion for libraries and their limitless possibilities, her dedication to everyone she serves, her commitment to excellence in all things and her belief that libraries are truly magical places that are alive with



Nikki Wesley/Metroland

**Burlington Public Library CEO Maureen Barry will be retiring this summer after 34 years of service. Barry says she's "looking forward to doing some Maureen things."**

ideas, imagination, discovery and joy," said Douglas.

Gone are the days when a library, for the most part, was a place to borrow books, or watch a librarian scour reference sources in a quest to answer a complex question.

When the internet arrived, people said it would mean the death of public libraries; in fact, they thrived, said Barry.

"People were stymied. They didn't know how to handle this huge resource. We had to learn too."

Libraries continue to be places where people seek information and librarians are still the people who help them find the authoritative and the real information, said Barry, 61, who spent a total of 34 years at BPL in various posts.

What's changed is the method of delivery, the sheer magnitude of information available and the rapid access to that data, she said.

She remembers the day of the first Shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986 when people were anxious for de-

tails and the only source of news in the library was the chief librarian's transistor radio.

"We were all huddled around this radio. Staff were in their cars listening to their car radios because people came in and wanted to talk about this."

Today, when people seek details about an event somewhere in the world, "we can immediately say, 'yes this did happen in Iraq, or 'yes there was an earthquake there.' To me, it's just scary how quickly we have that information."

BPL's mission statement was changed to reflect 21st century literacy, helping people gain financial and digital literacy; not just how to find all the information in digitized format, but how to operate all of the devices used to access that digital information, she said.

Libraries have always been community meeting places and that aspect is being celebrated even more now, she said.

More space is dedicated to seating, programs and services have expanded and

evolved to reflect the changing needs of the community. Metal shelves stacked with books remain, but they are fewer.

"Humans are social; they come to the library to be with other people, not necessarily to interact; others want to interact when they come here."

It's a place where seniors discuss current affairs, neighbours meet neighbours through children's storytime sessions and book clubs and friendships develop.

A library is often the first place newcomers to Canada come, said Barry, who ensured BPL was ready for the recent influx of locally sponsored Syrian refugees.

"We subscribed online to newspapers in Syrian languages, we found out which of our staff speak Arabic or French and who could be called upon to assist, and we worked with the Halton Multicultural Council."

Already in place were ESL Circles, Preparation for Citizenship courses and weekly visits by settlement

workers "to wade through that puzzle of 'How do I integrate into Canadian society? What's available and how do I apply for it? That role as a welcoming place for newcomers is a very compelling story."

The library as a safe and welcoming destination for those who are socially isolated and want to drop in for conversation with a staff member, is also important she said.

"It may be the only conversation they have in the day; we take that very seriously. It might be the only human point of contact for some people. It's a privilege and we watch out for them," said Barry.

One of the things she is most proud of from her tenure as CEO is allowing her staff opportunities to grow and take on challenges.

"The ability to conceive of an idea and implement it, that's what I've tried to encourage."

Enabling her employees to grow and gain confidence and providing a forum for exploring and implementing ideas even infiltrated

BPL's strategic plan. Once a document created by the board and a consultant behind closed doors, Barry opened it up as a staff-led project.

A Dragon's Den initiative led to the Idea Work Studio, an aquaponic garden, and a "wonderful big collection of giant games" for outdoor summer outreach programs.

Barry said her predecessor touted the CEO position "as the best job in the world and I agree with her. It's a great position to have. We can't underestimate the great work we're doing here."

Immediate retirement plans are to turn off her alarm clock and indulge in "Maureen time for awhile."

On her to-do list are learning how to use her new camera, going to matinees and lunches with friends, spending time with her nieces and nephews and continuing her travels.

"I'll do some reading too," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"It's been a long ride and a great ride."