

More than just books, an ode to the public library

By Kaitlin Sylvester

IT'S NOT A bold stance to support the funding of libraries, yet in an increasingly digital age, we seem to be doing just that. It's easy to forget that the value of a library lies in more than just books. The Ontario Library Association calls libraries "the one community gathering place" which provides equal access for all to information, knowledge, culture, and learning resources in print and electronic format, along with advice, assistance and connections, to transform individuals, communities and the economy. What a mouthful! This statement belies a deeper truth that resonates in the very heart of our communities: our libraries are not just repositories of books, they are indispensable institutions that play crucial roles in our lives. They have quietly, steadfastly, taken their place as the third place outside of home and work. Certainly libraries are one of the last free third spaces, offering a sense of community, connection, and purpose without the price tag. When I moved to Maynooth in 2022, it was the library that became my sanctuary. For a few hours each week, I was able to access community, meet my neighbours on neutral ground, and access resources to help ease the transition. I even did some research into the history of my property, which I thought was very cool. Libraries serve as democratic spaces where everyone, regardless of their status or background, can access the information. First established in Peterborough, New Hampshire in 1833, libraries provide resources for civic engagement, youth development, and lifelong learning. Libraries can serve as settings for public forums and intellectual discussions, embodying the essence of a functional democracy. Numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between library usage and the broader spectrum of public health as libraries have evolved to become hubs for health programming. Not only through information dissemination, which is critical, but through actual programs such as fitness sessions, vaccine clinics, and open hours for public health consultations. Last week I worked out of the Peterborough Library and I witnessed a number of individuals use the services of the public health consultant office hours. These folks were looking for assistance in navigating their own health, the health of loved ones, or even assistance in navigating the sometimes confusing systems of government programming. In this way libraries are critical in disseminating information on healthcare, with staff serving as navigators and guides, helping citizens access the care they need. As the research on the social determinants of health grows, libraries have been recognized for their integral role in supporting the well-being of their patrons. A 2018 study by the Center for Disease Control actually found that library visits exceed the number of physician office visits by more than 50 per cent, a number likely higher in our own community where family doctors are scarce. Further data from the same study showed that 42 per cent of patrons reported using libraries' digital resources to search for health information. In the last 10 years, as utilization of public libraries has increased dramatically (up to 20 per cent), Ontario libraries have experienced a 73 per cent decline in provincial funding, making Ontario's contribution to library funding significantly lower than other provinces. The argument for libraries is not merely sentimental; it is based on a robust body of evidence that underscores their critical role in shaping our society. It's an institution we cannot afford to lose. Our libraries are reflections of who we are and who we aspire to be - custodians of knowledge, champions of community, and voices of inclusion. In tough economic times, more and more citizens require access to the computers, on-line databases, and specialized training programs traditionally provided by libraries. When cities and towns craft their budgets, they must do so with the understanding that libraries are not an expense, but a wise investment in the future of their citizens. After all, isn't a healthy, connected, and informed society the greatest treasure of them all? In my opinion, journalist David Morris said it best: "In an age of greed and selfishness, the public library stands as an enduring monument to the values of cooperation and sharing. In an age where global corporations stride the earth, public libraries remain firmly rooted in local communities."