

—Slug:.....COMM-0846.bratt.Starr_retiring
—Contributor.....Joyce Marcel
—Contributor email.....joyrand@sover.net
—For section.....News
—Format.....News - byline and dateline
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
—Article Number:.....42827

Notes from editor (not for publication):

Aw, man. She is fantastic. She'll be a tough act to follow.

Nice work using her words to tell the story. I moved a chunk (now starting at line 59) to more fluidly explain the shifting of the trends.

Line 21 — I fixed a lot of info about this book. If Starr wonders why any of it was changed, I can elaborate.

Line 26 — If they really chose Brattleboro before the position opened, they wouldn't have come to make sure.

Line 179 — Susie Smallheer quoted Jerry Carbone in her Herald article about Read's bequest in 2013.

While double checking some things, I came across [this link](#). Starr's name is *Marina*? I knew it! I told Olga in 2015 when Starr was hired, "That's not a real name!" (To be fair, Olga reported from the Selectboard meeting that the new director's name was "Star Electronica.") But in a town with a Spoon, a Breeze, and a Vidda, she damn well can be a Starr.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 A chapter closes

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Starr LaTronica will step down in April after a decade as

3 Brattleboro's library director, having transformed Brooks

4 Memorial Library 'from a place to a presence'

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

6 #####BEGIN TEXT####

6 For a decade, Brooks Memorial Library has been the
7 front door of Brattleboro. Now the woman who flung open that
8 door is leaving.

9 Starr LaTronica, 71, resigned as head librarian just before
10 the new year. She will stay in her position until April, giving the
11 town time to find her replacement.

12 LaTronica began as head librarian in Brattleboro in
13 2016, after a long and successful career as a librarian in
14 Binghamton, New York, where as the head librarian she managed
15 a system encompassing 42 member libraries.

16 She has also served as chair of the John Newbery Medal
17 committee, as a past president of the Association for Library
18 Service for Children, a division of the American Library
19 Association, and as a judge for the National Book Awards. She
20 has helped decide the annual list of *The New York Times'* Best
21 Illustrated Children's Books.

22 She is the namesake for Daniel Pinkwater's librarian
23 character Starr Lakawanna in his book *Looking for Bobowicz*
24 (HarperCollins: 2004), who utters the immortal lines "I live to
25 astonish, amaze, and astound. Those are things librarians do
26 well."

27 LaTronica and her husband, John, a builder, eyed
28 Brattleboro as their community long before the head librarian
29 position opened.

30 "When we knew this job was available, we started
31 coming and hanging out more frequently to make sure we really
32 like the town as much as we thought we did," LaTronica told *The*
33 *Commons*. "I wouldn't tell them why I was asking, but I would
34 ask everybody, 'So what do you think about the library?' And the
35 worst thing anybody said to me was, 'I really should go more.'

36 “Well, I thought, *This is a great place to be a librarian.*

37 And I was not wrong. It was.

38 “The community is so incredibly responsive and so
39 supportive. Even those people that don’t come to the library, they
40 still support the library because they understand that it’s for the
41 public good.”

42 Dealing with change

43 LaTronica arrived in Brattleboro just as libraries were on
44 the cusp of major changes.

45 They have always been a welcoming place, offering their
46 communities free information, knowledge, and a quiet place to
47 read.

48 But the internet was changing everything.

49 Card catalogs disappeared. Google offered easy
50 searching of the world’s knowledge at your fingertips; Wikipedia
51 emerged as an enormous crowdsourced encyclopedia. You no
52 longer had to sit and read a book by hand; you could listen while
53 running on a treadmill.

54 Meanwhile, bookstores went under. Banking went
55 online. Medicine went online. States and the federal government
56 followed. Magazines went online. So did television.

57 Suddenly, one of the most important services the library
58 could offer was its public internet connection.

59 Yet, as the world grew into the internet age, LaTronica
60 has seen how people have realized technology’s limitations and
61 came back to the library.

62 “Luckily, people realize now that not everything that you
63 see on the internet can be trusted, and so they have come back to
64 the library to get the expertise of the best reference librarian I’ve
65 ever worked with, Jeanne Walsh,” she said.

66 “Also, children’s service libraries never fell away,
67 because that is really the heart of the library,” she added. “Parents
68 always recognize that.”

69 That's because "the socialization kids get, the agency
70 they get, that they can come in, they can choose books, and a
71 parent doesn't have to worry about the price of the book or
72 anything — it's one of the first places that kids can make their
73 own decisions, which is a great thing," LaTronica said.

74 The children's department also offers group experiences,
75 "like story time, where parents learn songs and finger plays and
76 rhymes to do with their kids, and kids develop social skills by
77 being in a group," she continued. "Kids' services always kept
78 libraries afloat, even in that messy time when the people thought
79 the internet was going to solve everything."

80 **'That's sharing'**

81 When LaTronica began her work at Brooks, libraries
82 were being threatened by powerful interests. The Heritage
83 Foundation and other right-wing organizations have for years
84 funded and coordinated a movement to slash library funding
85 from town budgets, effectively privatizing or closing them.

86 This was an effort that she especially frowned upon.

87 "What makes libraries great is that they are for
88 everybody," LaTronica said. "They are the public good."

89 Once, she said, she was talking to a group of
90 preschoolers about libraries, "and I explained how they worked
91 and how everybody gives money through their taxes, and then
92 we buy things, and then everybody borrows them, and then they
93 bring them back."

94 "That's sharing," one little girl told LaTronica.

95 Nationally, censorship also reared its ugly head.

96 "It depends on where you are in the country," LaTronica
97 said. "That's why I'm a really lucky librarian to be in this in this
98 community. This community is a protection against some of the
99 more horrible strains of anti-humanity going on in the rest of the
100 country. Luckily, we have not had challenges to materials here."

101 She said there has been only one challenge during her
102 tenure, and “that was a misunderstanding” on the part of the
103 complainant.

104 “She hadn’t read the book,” LaTronica said. “She
105 misunderstood the title and thought it was about something else.
106 So that got cleared up in a hurry.”

107 Other than “some complaints around programming that
108 we did several years ago,” community support for the collection
109 and for those programs “was overwhelming,” she said.

110 **Keeping a good thing going**

111 The retirement of Brooks’s former head librarian, Jerry
112 Carbone, opened the doors for LaTronica as his successor. She
113 credits his leadership for building a library that was widely
114 respected and appreciated by its town and the region.

115 Carbone, widely loved in the community, “left me with
116 just a fantastic staff and such a solid reputation in the community,
117 that everybody already loved and supported the library,”
118 LaTronica said. “I couldn’t do what I’ve done here in a lot of
119 other communities. This community, which is what made me
120 want to move here, is just so unique and so engaged in the
121 common good.”

122 She believes that spirit has made her 10-year-long tenure
123 so successful.

124 “It’s been my experience in this community that so many
125 people are engaged in efforts, whether they’re volunteers,
126 whether they’re activists, whether they’re are leaders or
127 employees of not-for-profits, or if they’re just residents, they are
128 working towards the common good,” LaTronica said.

129 “Even when we find ourselves on opposite sides of
130 opinions, there’s a sense that I get from this community that we
131 care about the town and we want the town to be as good as it
132 can be. That’s what I love, and that’s the kind of support and
133 benefit I’ve received from this community. It’s an encouragement

134 and inspiration. People know one another. They know one
135 another's names. You don't see that everywhere."

136 From the beginning, the electric LaTronica threw herself
137 into the community. There was seemingly not a social service
138 organization whose board she did not join, not an art show or
139 meeting she did not attend, not a homeless person whose name
140 she did not know, and a connection to the library that she did not
141 tie down.

142 "My goal was to just inform and educate and inspire
143 everybody to use this incredible resource," she said. "It's at their
144 fingertips. If you think that this library doesn't have something for
145 you, then please — I'm inviting you to come in. I'll find
146 something for you in this library."

147 Today, Brooks is as much a community center as a
148 library. You can borrow passes to most of the nearby museums.
149 You can check out snowshoes or cooking equipment or an
150 electric bicycle from Brooks' Library of Things. You can listen to
151 legislators explain their goals for the year. You can hear authors
152 speak about their latest books.

153 In LaTronica's own words, she has moved the library
154 from being "a place to a presence."

155 "I made an effort to really go out," Latronica said. "I went
156 to the [Brattleboro] Farmers' Market, to the table at the
157 [Brattleboro Food] Co-op. Everybody I talked to in the town knew
158 I was a librarian. That is my identity. So people really came to
159 think of the library as the place if they wanted an event, if they
160 wanted to have a meeting, if they wanted some kind of program.
161 They would think, 'Oh, the library should do that.' And now I
162 really see it as the pulse of the community."

163 **'You see everything'**

164 LaTronica waves a hand from her seat behind a giant
165 computer in her office on the mezzanine, down to the main
166 reading room below.

167 “You can really see what’s going on here,” she said. “You
168 can see the folks that are hanging out here. You see everything.”

169 She describes that scene on the library main floor as “a
170 microcosm of the community.”

171 “Folks are coming and doing art for a while. People are
172 coming here and working on puzzles. You see people with
173 disabilities and people who are aging, and some people that I
174 think maybe staying here all day because their house is cold,”
175 LaTronica said.

176 The library, she continued, is “a place where people
177 come to be around other people, and there aren’t that many
178 places that you can just come and be around other people.
179 Sometimes we’ll have two people playing Scrabble at a table
180 downstairs.”

181 Shortly before LaTronica’s arrival, the town learned of a
182 surprising \$1.2 million bequest to the library by Ronald Read, a
183 retired gas station attendant and janitor who had secretly
184 amassed wealth through stock market investing. He also left \$4.8
185 million to Brattleboro Memorial Hospital.

186 The library’s two small meeting rooms on its mezzanine
187 — in such heavy demand they are usually booked all day —
188 were part of a renovation of the library building using the Read
189 bequest.

190 “We never could have done that without him,” LaTronica
191 said. “People are tutoring or having a chess lesson or having a
192 Zoom call or something. They’re always busy, you know.”

193 The library also got a teen reading room, which replaces
194 “a little movable shelf in the middle of the adult reading room,
195 which is not a place to hang out.”

196 The new space is called the “Spicy Lime.”

197 “That’s the name the teens voted for,” LaTronica said.

198 “The teens get to have some agency there, so that’s what they
199 picked. I’m really, really proud of the room. It’s a special place
200 for teens.

201 “And every time there’s a youth council meeting or any
202 gathering of teens, and they talk about where are safe, or about
203 good places for teens to go in the community, they always
204 mention the library. And that’s because they have their own
205 space, and that wouldn’t have been the case before,” she
206 continued.

207 **What’s next?**

208 Will it surprise anyone that while LaTronica is leaving
209 Brooks, she has no intention of ever giving up being a librarian?

210 “I can’t imagine ever stopping work,” she said. “I can’t
211 imagine not being a librarian. I’ve been a librarian longer than
212 I’ve been a wife or a mother. So I intend to work until they haul
213 me away feet first.”

214 LaTronica says she wants to return to working with youth
215 — her professional speciality prior to her roles in top
216 management.

217 “And that’s really where my heart is, and that’s where my
218 expertise is,” she said. “So I miss the candor of kids. There’s no
219 better way to fight cynicism than to work with children. They’re
220 just the hope of the world, and I have a blast with them, and they
221 get my jokes, darn it.”

222 The LaTronicas have three children: a son and twin
223 daughters. One of her daughters, Ramona, 32, is a school
224 librarian in Turners Falls, Massachusetts.

225 “I can really spend some time there and do some fun
226 things with kids,” LaTronica said. “I’m going to ask her to let me
227 volunteer there. Actually, I’m going to make her let me
228 volunteer.”

229 So, after a decade, it is time for Brooks to have another
230 library director.

231 “Jerry Carbone said that it is a transformational moment
232 that occurs when a library gets a new director,” LaTronica said.
233 “I’m so grateful that I was able to contribute my vision and to
234 make some changes and bring some new things along. And now I

235 think it's time for somebody else to come in and freshen things
236 up.
237 "I've been here 10 years. It's time for somebody to come
238 in with another vision, with another perspective, and it's only
239 going to be better," LaTronica said. "It's absolutely only going to
240 be better."

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

241

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

242

0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

243

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

244

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

245

####END LOGLINE####

