

—Slug:.....COMM-0864.bratt.Starrs_long_goodbye
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—For section.....News
—Format.....News - byline and dateline
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
—Article Number:.....43584



Notes from editor (not for publication):

“there is now internet access for all patrons.” —There hadn’t been?

Nice job, Joyce.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 In it for the heart

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 As she leaves Brooks (but not books), Starr LaTronica
3 reflects on a career — and a decade as library director in
4 Brattleboro — defined by connection, compassion, and
5 community

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 Starr LaTronica became a librarian for the connections it
8 allows her to make with other people.

9 “It’s serving people,” she recently told *The Commons*.
10 “That’s what I’m about. And that’s what I’ll always be about. I
11 know my strength is a passion for community engagement. I
12 know that I have a lot of other weaknesses. And so I’m grateful
13 for my staff for picking up the pieces and making this place keep
14 going.”

15 LaTronica, 72, became head librarian at Brooks
16 Memorial Library in 2015 after a distinguished career as a
17 children’s librarian and library director. She will be retiring on
18 Saturday, May 9.

19 Julie Perrin, from the Jaffrey (New Hampshire) Public
20 Library will replace her beginning on Monday, May 11.

21 “I think my greatest accomplishment here is that I have
22 hired and retained a fabulous staff, so that helps me sleep easier
23 at nights,” LaTronica said. “And although I’ve only met her a
24 couple times, the person that’s going to take over the office looks
25 to be a crackerjack. So I’m really excited for the town and for
26 her.”

27 When LaTronica came to Brattleboro, she set about
28 becoming deeply involved in her new community. She
29 succeeded so well that she became a one-name celebrity — just
30 say “Starr” and everyone knows whom you are speaking about.

31 “I tend to be civically minded — it’s hand in glove with
32 my profession — and the best way to get to know my new home
33 and meet people was to attend public events like meetings,
34 forums, concerts, lectures, the brown bag chat that happened at
35 noon in the River Garden, even Selectboard meetings,” she said.

36 “I loved — and still love — that there is somewhere you
37 can connect with your fellow humans on almost any given day in
38 this neck of the woods,” LaTronica continued. “The calendar in
39 *The Commons* proves my point.”

40 Why did LaTronica work to make herself so connected?

41 “I wanted to meet people and hear what they wanted
42 from the library,” she said. “And I wanted to see where the library

43 could meet their needs, or find a way to connect them with
44 resources.”

45 Doing so “also gave me a chance to let people know
46 about the great things the library was already doing,” she added.

47 “I haven’t been able to attend many events recently,
48 since I’m trying to tie up loose ends, but I am looking forward to
49 getting back in the swing of things, volunteering and attending all
50 kinds of gatherings, including finally getting to some of the great
51 events that are going on at the Broad Brook Grange in Guilford,”
52 LaTronica said.

53 **Praise and honors pile up**

54 Ever since LaTronica announced she was retiring, the
55 town, the county, and even the state have been celebrating her.

56 On April 25, the library was packed with people who
57 came to her first farewell party. There were speeches, music, and
58 food provided by the Friends of Brooks Memorial Library.

59 “It was just what I’d hoped for, which was just all kinds of
60 folks coming together, having a good time, chatting with one
61 another,” LaTronica said.

62 “It was great to see so much interaction and conversation
63 going on. And then some people said some nice things about me,
64 which is always lovely. And I got to see some folks that I hadn’t
65 seen in a while,” she added.

66 “And it was great because I saw little toddlers and
67 preschoolers all the way up to, you know, people even older than
68 me,” LaTronica said.

69 Then the Vermont House of Representatives and the
70 Vermont Senate passed a proclamation honoring the “amazing”
71 LaTronica at the request of state Reps. Mollie Burke, Ian
72 Goodnow, and Emilie Kornheiser of Brattleboro; Zon Eastes of
73 Guilford; Leslie Goldman of Rockingham, Emily Long of
74 Newfane, Mike Mrowicki of Putney, and Laura Sibilia of Dover,
75 plus Windham County Senators Wendy Harrison and Nader
76 Hashim.

77 The proclamation pretty much summed up LaTronica’s
78 effect on Brooks and the wider Brattleboro community.

79 “Whereas, as the Brooks’ new librarian, she immediately
80 immersed herself in the Brattleboro community, gaining valuable
81 insight into why Brattleboro is a special place,” began the
82 proclamation, going on to praise her as “a powerful champion
83 against censorship.”

84 It also praised her for nurturing a “broad library
85 collection encompassing informative and stimulating books and
86 serials, as well as sundry other items, ranging from Brattleboro
87 Museum passes to snowshoes.”

88 LaTronica was acknowledged for bringing a variety of
89 speakers and diverse programming to the library, and for ensuring
90 that “there is now internet access for all patrons.”

91 Lastly, the proclamation praised her for the way she has
92 helped the library continually confront “the demanding realities
93 of homelessness and addiction in Brattleboro. And under Starr
94 LaTronica’s thoughtful leadership, these challenges have been
95 addressed compassionately and creatively.”

96 She had a wonderful day at the State House, LaTronica
97 said.

98 “It was really, really, really lovely,” LaTronica said. “And
99 my family came, and [Town Manager] John Potter came, and
100 [Selectboard Vice Chair] Oscar Heller came, and a bunch of staff
101 members and some friends of the library. it was really an amazing
102 recognition.”

103 If anyone has missed these opportunities to celebrate
104 LaTronica, a third day of celebration will come on her last day,
105 Saturday, May 9, when from 10 to 11 a.m., LaTronica will tell her
106 favorite stories. From 4 to 5 p.m., Fred Breunig and Andy Davis
107 will play some of her favorite tunes for the last hour of her last
108 day.

109 After all that, will LaTronica stop being a librarian?

110 Of course not. She plans to use her retirement to be a
111 volunteer librarian in the Gill and Montague, Massachusetts

112 school systems under her daughter, Ramona, who is also a
113 librarian.
114 “She’s got three different libraries she oversees, and so
115 I’m going to help her,” LaTronica said.

116 **Leading in tumultuous times**

117 When LaTronica took over at Brooks, the whole concept
118 of having a public library was being challenged.

119 “The controversy about the libraries 10 years ago was:
120 Were they still relevant, were they still necessary to a strong
121 community and a thriving community?” LaTronica said.

122 When you think about it, there have always been
123 libraries, even in ancient times. People still talk about the partial
124 burning of the Library of Alexandria by Julius Caesar in 48 BCE.
125 There are law libraries and academic libraries and of course there
126 will always be private libraries.

127 But the concept of a public library was developed only at
128 the beginning of the last century when the first one opened in
129 Peterborough, New Hampshire.

130 “It’s such an enlightened concept, the concept of the
131 public libraries,” LaTronica said. “It’s so idealistic that people
132 understand that it benefits the entire community when we share.
133 We pool our resources and then we share them with one another.
134 And some people pool more resources because they pay more
135 taxes or they donate to the library, but then those resources are
136 available to everyone.”

137 Public libraries have always been community centers,
138 LaTronica said. Some of the earlier ones had public showers and
139 even swimming pools to serve an immigrant population.

140 “This was a time when people didn’t have ready access
141 to those things,” LaTronica said. “And so if you pooled everything
142 together, then everyone would benefit.

143 “If immigrant families have a chance to achieve
144 education, and if people who are working in factories all day
145 have a chance to come and hear lectures at night or read, then

146 the library becomes the university of the immigrant, the university
147 of the less privileged,” she added. “And that’s what it is. It’s the
148 people’s university.”

149 Brattleboro’s library may have started as a subscription
150 library, LaTronica said.

151 “It was a place where people literally pooled their
152 resources by bringing in books,” she said. “But then public
153 libraries came along that were supported by the populace and
154 available to all.”

155 So are public libraries still relevant? “I think we’ve had
156 the answer resoundingly,” LaTronica said. “In this community,
157 absolutely yes. And so that’s incredibly gratifying.”

158 **‘That about killed me’**

159 The hardest time for LaTronica came during lockdown in
160 the early days of the pandemic.

161 “I would have these Zoom meetings with Peter Elwell,
162 who was the town manager at the time, and the first couple times
163 I tried to meet with him, I burst into tears and couldn’t stop
164 crying,” LaTronica said.

165 “It was because all my professional life, it’s been, ‘Come
166 to the library.’ ‘Please come to the library.’ ‘Oh, get into the
167 library.’ ‘I’ll meet you at the library.’ And then I had to lock the
168 doors!

169 “That about killed me,” LaTronica said. “That just did me
170 in, that that I couldn’t let people in here. It was a huge, huge
171 blow.”

172 The staff did what it could to serve the public. The
173 children’s room staff created bundles of similar-themed books
174 that families could check out.

175 “We’d put them on the table outside and close the door,
176 and then a person could walk up to 6 feet and get them and walk
177 away,” LaTronica said. “And we had care packages with
178 thermometers in them, because not everybody had a

179 thermometer at home, and then all of a sudden you needed to
180 take your temperature every day.
181 “We worked with United Way on that, and Out in the
182 Open, and Youth Services [now Interaction: Youth Services and
183 Restorative Justice],” she said. “We hired a local company to
184 make cloth masks, which unfortunately we now know weren’t as
185 effective as we hoped. And we provided Badger Balm for people
186 because they were washing their hands like crazy.”

187 **Creating a community**

188 **resource**

189 Today, “we get our content in so many different ways,”
190 LaTronica said.

191 “We recognize that people have so many different ways
192 of accessing knowledge and culture and entertainment, whether
193 its from a lecture or a program or seeing live birds of prey on the
194 main floor of the library,” she explained.

195 “That’s why libraries have worked to bring content in a
196 myriad of forms to to everybody. That’s why you see more and
197 more programming in libraries.”

198 One such addition is the Library of Things, “because we
199 recognize that we have different kinds of learners in the world,”
200 she said.

201 “We have visual learners and verbal learners,” LaTronica
202 said. “And we have people that like to see things in real life. We
203 have people that like to do do stuff with their hands to learn.
204 That’s why we have a tool shed and cooking equipment and
205 things like that.”

206 It takes only a glance at the library’s weekly online
207 newsletter to see evidence of LaTronica’s programming skills.
208 Among the activities: a fiber group meeting to knit, a circus-style
209 exercise program for seniors, an art group (also for seniors), a
210 science fiction reading group, a military experience reading
211 group, a tech group — plus a variety of children and teen events.

212 A crowning achievement is the recently launched online
213 directory of every community organization and agency in the
214 area available to help people, which “eventually will expand to
215 include cultural institutions and educational opportunities, all
216 these things, so that people can go and access all these
217 wonderful, wonderful organizations in this area that are doing
218 amazing work,” she said.

219 “It’s hard to know about all of them, and it’s hard to see
220 how they all fit,” LaTronica continued. “So we’re inviting
221 agencies to put their information into this directory, which will
222 also help keep it up to date.”

223 Now, “if somebody comes in and says, ‘I need help with
224 my heating bill,’ or ‘I need food,’ or ‘I’m worried about my
225 neighbor, I’m worried there’s domestic abuse there,’ they will
226 have a place to find help,” she said.

227 **Upgrading the plant**

228 LaTronica came to Brooks at a fortuitous time because
229 the library had just received an unexpected \$1.2 million bequest
230 from Ronald Read.

231 Read, of Brattleboro, was a gas station attendant, a
232 mechanic, and a janitor. He was also a gifted investor. After his
233 death in 2014, he left approximately \$6 million to Brooks and
234 other various charities for a stunned and grateful community.

235 “That has really enabled this library to move forward and
236 to flourish,” LaTronica said. “We would not be anywhere near
237 where we are if we hadn’t had that.”

238 Library trustees put most of the money in an endowment.
239 Brooks Memorial Library draws down 4% of that endowment
240 every year to supplement town funding.

241 “So that means that they were able to take over the
242 purchase of books and other materials,” LaTronica said. “Half the
243 periodicals budget, professional development for staff, and all
244 programming is paid either by the endowment or by the Friends

245 [of Brooks Memorial Library, a nonprofit that supports the library
246 and its programming].”

247 The financial relief “allowed the town then to hire
248 people and bring staffing levels up so that we could restore the
249 hours that had been cut earlier,” she added.

250 The Read money also enabled LaTronica to update the
251 1967 building. Slowly, so as not to disturb the flow of people to
252 the library, new flooring and carpet were put in, bathrooms were
253 upgraded or created, a teen reading room was developed, new
254 office space and meeting rooms were carved out, and now,
255 thanks to funding from the American Rescue Plan Act under the
256 Biden administration, a pavilion is being created in the grounds
257 behind the library.

258 “We also created the art storage room, which actually
259 has become our archive room,” LaTronica said. “So Jeanne
260 Walsh, our reference librarian, is putting together the Special
261 Collections in there for people who come and do research that is
262 connected locally.”

263 The library also “completely refurbished” the children’s
264 room, she said.

265 “We replaced the ceiling, which had 50 years of grime
266 around the vents, [and that] made a huge, huge difference,”
267 LaTronica said. “We also replaced the HVAC system. The
268 endowment paid for half of that, and the town covered half.”

269 **Helping the helpless**

270 During the past few years, one of the library’s biggest
271 challenges has been the rise in homelessness. Many of the
272 dispossessed seek shelter in the library, which is open to the
273 public for long hours. It is warm in winter, and offers — besides
274 free reading materials — computer access, free water, and open
275 bathrooms (although the two by the children’s room are kept
276 locked).

277 Sometimes, often at closing time, people do not want to
278 leave the safety and warmth of the library. A few times there have
279 been disruptions. Once or twice there has been violence.

280 The creation of the Brattleboro Resource Assistance Team
281 (BRAT), a group of uniformed but unarmed personnel focused on
282 public safety, has helped enormously, LaTronica said.

283 “You’re bringing in uniformed police officers, which
284 sometimes gets everybody a little on edge,” she said. “But we
285 recently had a woman come and say, ‘All of a sudden, I feel
286 really faint. I don’t feel well, and I don’t think I can walk home.’
287 There’s no cab in Brattleboro. What can we do? We called BRAT,
288 and they gave her a ride home because she couldn’t get there on
289 her own.

290 “I feel we are really, really lucky to have that resource in
291 town, one that helps people,” LaTronica said. “And one that will
292 come in if somebody is in crisis, or somebody is really
293 struggling.”

294 **Memorable moments**

295 The most memorable moments for LaTronica have been
296 “the little delightful daily details of things,” she said.

297 “Like I keep a little box of fake snowballs in my office. So
298 when kids come to see me in my office, they can throw
299 snowballs off the balcony at the staff,” LaTronica said.

300 And one time, the citizens’ police committee was
301 meeting here, and this little girl came to see me in my office. I’m
302 like, ‘Take these snowballs over there, to the room with the
303 policeman.’ She did it, and it was great. And she came to my
304 party last Saturday, and her favorite memory is that she got to
305 throw snowballs at the policeman.”

306 Another time, LaTronica wanted to see paper planes sail
307 off the balcony into the reading room, and the former circulation
308 librarian organized a paper plane derby — “a really, really great
309 night,” she added.

310 LaTronica is proud of having upgraded the library's art
311 collection, including complete restoration of the William Morris
312 Hunt plaster sculpture of horses, which now have a new frame
313 and display case, LaTronica said. "We hung it, and it's gorgeous."

314 She has noticed that the same horses at the Isabella
315 Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston was the same one. But I
316 know ours is nicer. And I love that we have a Faith Ringgold quilt
317 hanging in our main reading room. It's an amazing piece."

318 Also, LaTronica said, it has been wonderful meeting the
319 writers who live in the area.

320 "Getting to interact with Karen Hesse and Eileen
321 Christelow, who made us a library card," LaTronica said. "I've
322 wanted to meet her since we both lived in Berkeley at the same
323 time, but I had to move to Vermont to actually meet her. And Ann
324 Braden and Jessie Haas, and my wonderful office mate, Anna
325 Monders, who has a new book out.

326 "So just being able to interact with real luminaries. And
327 then there was the night that it was standing room only when
328 [*New Yorker* writer] Jill Lepore came and talked here. That was a
329 wonderful thing, too."

330 The human connections still mean the most to LaTronica.

331 "I am not fishing for compliments or looking for
332 reassurance," she said. "I am saying that every librarian I know
333 has devoted themselves to public librarianship. It's part of their
334 soul. I always say, I believe that I can save the world through
335 libraries. That's the only way I can figure out how to do it. We all
336 believe that.

337 "From the time I was a library page in Albany, California,
338 I saw the difference that it made to kids when they came in and
339 interacted with me and the rest of the staff," LaTronica said. "I
340 really, really believe we are all in it for the heart."

341 In some under-resourced urban libraries, librarians are
342 just patching stuff together, LaTronica said.

343 "They are keeping the staff and public safe, and they do
344 it because they believe," she said. "And my colleagues in little,

345 tiny libraries in rural areas, some are horribly under-resourced. I
346 know there were librarians I worked with in upstate New York
347 that were making minimum wage and buying summer reading
348 materials out of their own pockets.

349 "So, they really believe in what they're doing, and they're
350 heroes, and I'm really happy to be among them," LaTronica said.
351 "That's what I want to say."

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