



Renee *Di Pilato*

Sarasota County's New Libraries and Historical Resources Director

Sarasota County has a library system consisting of 10 libraries from south to north County with the first library opening in 1907 in downtown Sarasota. Renee became the Director of Libraries and Historical Resources in July.

"My position is about relationship building, setting goals, assessing the needs and wants of the community, and using information to direct the library system." With a budget of \$14.8 million, the library system saw 1,695,000 visitors and 2,605,000 check-outs in a 12-month period. The library system and historical services have 158 (FTE) employees, nearly 760,000 print books, 1,262 magazine subscriptions, 18 digital databases and 70 additional resources provided by the State.

A staple in almost every community is a place where one is always welcome, encouraged to visit often, staffed with knowledgeable employees, and offers plentiful learning opportunities. But this place has changed dramatically since its beginning in the 1880s. This place is the library—revered for its wealth of information and hospitable environment. Perhaps Andrew Carnegie, who funded 1,689 libraries in the United States between 1883 and 1929, envisioned the impact that libraries would have on communities and individuals.

Sarasota County is fortunate to have a library system consisting of 10 libraries from south to north County with the first library opening in 1907 in downtown Sarasota. Assuming the leadership of this system in July as the Director of Libraries and Historical Resources is Dr. Renee Di Pilato, an experienced and highly regarded library system administrator.

“I’m a career librarian with academic and public work experience,” says Renee. “My first job was at the Virginia Beach library and I spent 14 years at the Alexandria, Virginia, library with my last position being Deputy Director and Central Library Manager. I had many promotions due to a wonderful mentor. I was ready to advance to a position with more responsibilities. But I also wanted a specially sized library system so I could mentor staff and help them achieve their goals. I also have roots in the area. I visited my grandparents and uncle frequently in St. Petersburg. When I saw the position posting, I knew Sarasota was the ideal community for me. It is truly my dream job.”

Renee envisions her role as connecting people to resources that enrich, educate, entertain, and offer cultural experiences. “I oversee system activities of the library for children and adults, develop the budget, coordinate community groups and initiatives, offer cultural experiences, and interface with the Library Foundation and the Friends of the Library. My position is about relationship building, setting goals, assessing the needs and wants of the community, and using information to direct the library system.” With a budget of \$14.8 million, the library system saw 1, 695,000 visitors and 2,605,000 check-outs in a 12-month period. The library system and historical services have 158 (FTE) employees, nearly 760,000 print books, 1,262 magazine subscriptions, 18 digital databases and 70 additional resources provided by the State.

Renee credits Sarabeth Kalajian, the outgoing well-respected Director, with leaving the system poised to move forward, a “thinking” staff, and a commitment to literacy and innovation. She cites the various libraries in the county with each location having its own characteristics so this diversity offers opportunities to enhance services including adult programming that supports lifelong learning. When asked about challenges and frustrations of the job, she says, “Libraries in general are challenged by the changing hybrid environment of print and e-books. People still like print, but we’re tasked with providing more digital content. In addition monetary resources are limited. My frustrations arise from the perception that libraries in general are not relevant, but I don’t find that to be true in Sarasota County. So many people use the libraries and not just to borrow books, but to attend programs and to access digital resources such as movies, music, e-books, audiobooks, and DVDs. People are surprised by the number and scope of activities beyond books.”

Renee frequently mentions the encouragement she received from her mentor Rose Dawson, Executive Director of the Alexandria, Virginia, Library. Rose says, “Dr. Di Pilato is an energetic leader who is extremely creative, interacts well with people, and organizes, analyzes, and evaluates issues well. Renee has excellent problem-solving, writing, speaking, and presentation skills. She exudes confidence using new information technologies to enhance public library services while exhibiting a second-to-none work ethic. As Deputy Director of the library, she exhibited visionary leadership, helping to position the library system as a 21st century organization that meets the traditional and non-traditional needs of the community. She was appointed to the Commission on the Status of Women shortly before she left.”

For the short-term, Renee is learning the different municipalities and library and historical services staff—basically listening and learning—and attending library and community events to learn what the public desires. Also under consideration for possible 2020 implementation are Sunday hours at the downtown Sarasota Selby Library and at one south County library. A longer term goal is to develop Creation Stations at each library since they now exist at only three libraries.

A popular annual community experience is the One Book initiative where the entire community participates in reading, discussing, and attending events surrounding a chosen book. While the 2020 book title has not been released, Renee says the book’s theme will highlight women’s history in honor of the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. She says this activity is truly indicative of the role of libraries in bringing information, knowledge, and the community together.

The lesson from her professional career is to listen more—to staff, to the community—to learn what motivates staff and what the community wants. In Alexandria, she led a community assessment for the library consisting of 4,800 surveys, over 200 telephone interviews, 8 focus groups and 10 executive interviews resulting in a five-year plan through 2020.

Born in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Renee’s father was an NCIS special agent and her mother was a teacher. She has one brother. Her husband Andy is a metadata and systems librarian at the University of Tampa. They have two Japanese Chin dogs. As an adjunct faculty member at the University of Southern California, Renee teaches the online course “Introduction to Information Sources and Services.” She earned a Ph.D. in Managerial Leadership in the Information Professions from Simmons College, a Master’s degree in Public Administration from George Mason University, a Master’s degree in Library and Information Science from Catholic University, and a Bachelor’s degree in History and Urban Planning from Old Dominion University. Two years ago she had a three-week travel fellowship to England and Scotland with a future goal of doing a several-day tour of Cornwall libraries. In addition, Renee spent two childhood years living in Italy and Skypes once a month with relatives living there. She and Andy are people who hope to visit all 50 states having traveled to Hawaii this past summer to meet up with her Ph.D. cohort. Photography, tennis, and TV especially *Below Deck* and *Top Chef* round out her leisure activities. 🌿

🌿 STORY: Carol Darling

🌿 IMAGES: Evelyn England