

Local Libraries will be Kay Wheatley's Lasting Legacy

Rehoboth native is helping construct next generation across the state

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Article by Chris Flood

Kay Wheatley doesn't remember exactly what spurred her desire to help be a guiding force for building libraries around the state, but she thinks it happened after she participated in the construction of a new library in Seaford in the early 2000s.

Wheatley said she hadn't really wanted to help, but a friend asked her to attend a board meeting. Seven years later, she was still on the board and serving as president. Soon after the library in Seaford opened, Wheatley said she went to see how things were going. What she saw were people from all sides of society enjoying the new building.

"Libraries are one of those institutions that welcomes everybody," said Wheatley. "As the world changes, libraries have really adapted to meet the needs of the population they serve."

Wheatley, 67, was born and raised in the Seabreeze community off Coastal Highway's Forgotten Mile. She said she still lives on the same Dodd Avenue property, but the house is different. She went to Rehoboth Elementary and Cape Henlopen High School, when it was located on Savannah Road.

Wheatley has done a number of things in the professional career – working in clothing stores, property management, construction and consulting. She’s been a board member of the Rehoboth Beach-Dewey Beach Chamber of Commerce for 30 years. She’s stepping down from that role in April.

“I did a lot a stuff behind the scenes,” she said of her time with the chamber.

For about a year now, Wheatley has been in the news locally because of her work with the new Rehoboth Beach Public Library, but she’s also helping construct new libraries in Selbyville and Smyrna.

Wheatley said she didn’t necessarily set out to be known as a person who helps libraries get built. A lot of it has been word of mouth, so she set up a small consulting firm, she said, adding that most librarians are a great many things, but construction managers typically aren’t one of them.

“Librarians are extremely committed to what they do, and for what they get paid, it’s amazing they’re as committed as they are,” she said. “However, librarians understand libraries, not necessarily how to get one built.”

Wheatley said her history in construction dates back decades to when she and her ex-husband owned a construction company. She helped with special projects, and part of building a library means understanding the population it’s going to serve, she said.

“I was told I know just enough about construction to be a pain,” said Wheatley. “I know what questions to ask and what to look for.”

Growing up, Wheatley said she went to the Rehoboth library, but mainly because it was one of the few places she was allowed to walk to on her own after school was over. She said she wasn’t necessarily going there to read.

“It was more of a social place,” she said, laughing.

On the other hand, she said, her daughter Emily, whom she describes as her pride and joy, has always been an avid reader. She still remembers the time when Emily was 6 or 7 and came up to her with a huge stack of books to take home.

“We can come back,” Wheatley said she told Emily. “I had to limit her to one book a day.”

Emily is now a corporate lawyer for a law firm in Wilmington, said Wheatley. She would go to the Rehoboth library and study when she was preparing for the bar exam because there were too many distractions at home.

“Eventually, she learned she couldn’t sit next to the big windows on Rehoboth Avenue because the people-watching was just as distracting,” said Wheatley.

Rehoboth library officials garnered a bit of scrutiny when they announced last year their intention to open a new location outside town on Warrington Road. It was that scrutiny, and a headline in the Cape Gazette, that spurred the library board to focus on the downtown location first, said Wheatley.

“There was never any intention of not having a location downtown, but it became evident some people were only going to believe us if we did that location first,” said Wheatley.

The existing building has issues that need fixing, but the board is stuck in a place where it doesn't want to waste good money on issues that are going to be fixed during the remodeling process. For example, Wheatley said, the library spent more than \$40,000 on new air conditioning units. Before that was done, they made sure they would work with the next phase of the building.

Right now, the library board and city officials are working together to change a deed restriction related to one of the three lots the existing building sits on. The expectation, said Wheatley, is that legal work will be done soon after the new year, then the architect will be let loose for designing. Once that happens, the board will begin the fundraising process for the Warrington Road location, she said.

Renovating the existing building will present the library board and staff with operational challenges that, Wheatley said, they're still trying to figure out.

“We want as little disruption of services as possible,” she said.

Part of the process for the downtown location will be a self-examination of programming and a weeding out of the book collection. While programming is often geared toward younger kids, Wheatley said, more effort needs to be made on programming for adults.

Wheatley said the two Rehoboth library projects will likely be her last.

With all those irons in the fire, Wheatley said there hasn't been too much time for self-reflection about her lasting legacy. She said she doesn't like being in the spotlight, but it's also satisfying knowing she's been a small part of helping so many people.

“There's a false opinion out there that libraries aren't needed anymore,” she said. “That's just not the case. Libraries are as important and busy as ever. They just need to work a little harder to show how much they're being used.”



Kay Wheatley has been involved with local organizations for decades. Wheatley and her daughter Emily wave goodbye to visitors after Labor Day in 1996. At the time, Wheatley was Rehoboth Beach-Dewey Beach Chamber of Commerce president.



Kay Wheatley at the 1997 award ceremony for her induction into the Delaware Tourism Hall of Fame. Shown are (l-r) former Delaware Economic Development Office Director Robert Coy, former Delaware Tourism Office Director Gigi Windley, Wheatley and then-Gov. Tom Carper.



Kay Wheatley with friends in 2011 after winning a silent auction for a class on arranging flowers. Shown are (l-r) Marcia Windley, Wheatley, Peg Hertrich and Carol Sapna.