

help manage the library design and construction process and currently serves as vice president of the Friends board. “This is sustainability, this is resiliency, to create these relationships with one another, and relationships with the structures of the world that you live in.”

Round Valley’s Seed Library embodies those ideals of interdependence and regard for the land. All of the system’s branches now have seed libraries, each different according to their local microclimates—which vary widely across Mendocino County’s nearly 4,000 square miles—but Round Valley’s was the first, started by Library Technician Pat Sobrero in 2013. “The county really believes in supporting



**MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS** Staff and volunteers sort and label hundreds of packets for the Seed Library to give out and trade; Sobrero (r.) holds a reflective address sign, which will help first responders find residents during an emergency—the library distributes them as part of a partnership with the Round Valley Municipal Advisory Council’s Fire and Disaster Preparedness Working Group

sustainable agriculture and growing things that are adapted to the region,” says Hannum. “Covelo is inland and gets really hot in the summer and colder in the winter.”

An old wooden card catalog holds a large collection of seeds that community members can access for free, and a couple of seed and fruit tree scion swaps each year draw participants from all over the county. During the growing season, the Seed Library provides the local food bank with seed packets to distribute to community members who may be experiencing food insecurity. Local experts often speak at the library about seed saving and cultivation, with an eye toward healthy eating and sustainable growing practices.

“Interest in gardening and food production has only

grown since the COVID pandemic,” says Sobrero. “We focus on encouraging people to garden and save seeds and on developing locally adapted crop varieties that will grow and thrive in our extreme climate.” The library has distributed more than 4,600 seed packets over the past 12 months.

The Commons property also includes two lots, one of which—a grassy area shaded by walnut trees—is home to a Farmers Market on Fridays. The market is a gathering spot for the community as well as a place to shop. Residents sell organic produce, baked goods, and preserves that have often been processed in the Commons’ commercial kitchen. Monthly seed planting parties during the growing season, using seeds from the Seed Library, let people plant flowers and vegetables “to go.”

Sobrero also runs a sustainability film series with subjects ranging from beekeeping to restorative agriculture, bikes to forest management. Along with the Seed Library, says Bennett, the series “easily fits into that story of simple things that we can all do to lighten our footprint on Earth.”

**KEEPING CONNECTED**

Bennett credits Mendocino County Library Administrative Services Manager Barb Chapman with one of the library’s most important developments—its Wi-Fi connection. “When I started in 2016, the branch was connected with fixed wireless. What that means is there’s a microwave signal beamed out from a mountaintop,”

he says. “It was unreliable and it was slow.” On Fridays, the library’s busiest days, “the Wi-Fi would just kind of whimper.” For residents dependent on the library to print a document, access telehealth or social services, register at the county DMV, or do homework, this was more than just an inconvenience.

In 2019, Chapman began work to connect the Mendocino Library system to the Corporation for Education Network Initiatives in California (CENIC), a nonprofit consortium, and helped secure \$100,000 in grant funding from the California State Library. CENIC installed the first fiber optic high-speed broadband lines in the county; the schools were wired up with high-speed internet at the same

time. The network upgrade to the Round Valley Branch was completed in 2022, to the delight of patrons and staff alike. “It’s a huge success and a win for this community,” says Bennett. “Folks get connected via Wi-Fi, they have reliable public computers, and those of us who are conducting library business have an uninterrupted workflow and ability to serve patrons.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROUND VALLEY LIBRARY

**About the Best Small Library in America Award** LJ’s annual award, with the support of sustaining sponsor Ingram Library Services, was created in 2005 to showcase the exemplary work of libraries serving populations under 25,000. The winning library will receive a cash prize of \$5,000 from Ingram; its representatives will be recognized at the Association for Rural & Small Libraries Conference in Springfield, MA, thanks to support from Ingram. Two honorable mention institutions will each receive \$1,000.



**HONORABLE MENTION**

**NORTHFIELD PUBLIC LIBRARY | MINNESOTA**

**NATALIE DRAPER** | Library Director



Staff and leadership at Minnesota’s Northfield Public Library (NPL) believe that a library serves most effectively when in ongoing, open dialogue with its community. Prioritizing that connection extends in many directions, from the library-initiated Pride in the Park festival celebrating the local LGBTQIA+ community to a new Teen Space for gaming, studying, or just hanging out.

The library focuses on equity initiatives, particularly outreach and support to the city’s Latine community. To that end, NPL has increased bilingual services and tutoring and works to recruit Latine staff; it currently employs six full- and part-time Spanish-speaking staff members, who are mentored by the library’s outreach coordinator.

Arts are also central to NPL’s mission. Director Natalie Draper serves as staff liaison to the Northfield Arts and Culture Commission, and has led projects such as Sidewalk Poetry, now in its 11th year of pressing poems by local poets into freshly poured sidewalks; the city’s Poet Laureate program; diverse, intergenerational

Community Initiative, Northfield Community College Collaborative, Fifty North (a center for active older adults), Head Start, United Way, and Rice County Social Services—all of which have robust partnerships with the library—the fully-staffed Library Oasis offers 24-hour access to holds, computers,

Open Mic Poetry gatherings; and a monthlong Hispanic Heritage Celebration arts festival that draws thousands and has grown into a citywide event.

For residents who may have limited transportation options or don’t frequent the library’s downtown site, last fall NPL opened the Library Oasis, a full-service satellite location in the Northfield Community Resource Center facility on the city’s south side. The ADA-accessible facility is located on a bus route near affordable housing and public schools. Sharing space with the Community Action Center, Healthy

notary service, printing, copying, faxing/scanning, flexible meeting and work space, and programs and services in English and Spanish.

NPL “prides itself on bringing the library with us wherever we go,” says Draper. “Whether at our concerts in the parks, through home delivery service, bookmobile and book bike visits, outreach to schools and communities, at the library’s new Oasis location, or at the Carnegie Library in Northfield’s historic downtown, the community recognizes the library as a trusted provider of friendly, inclusive, equitable service.”—Lisa Peet

**TRIBAL PARTNERSHIPS**

The federally recognized nation of Round Valley Indian Tribes is one of the state’s largest and—as with many Indigenous U.S. territories—has a complex, difficult history. It originated as a confederation of smaller tribes forcibly relocated from their own lands by white settlers, in the mid-19th century, to the homeland of the Yuki tribe. Some were enemies, and nearly all spoke other languages, held other beliefs, and used the land and its products differently. In 1936, descendants of the Yuki, Wailacki, Concow, Little Lake Pomo, Nomlacki, and Pit River peoples formed a new tribe on the reservation, adopting a constitution and creating the Covelo Indian Community, later called the Round Valley Indian Tribes.

The library has a longstanding relationship with tribal government, and hosts tribal programs and community events year-round, as well as collaborating with the Round Valley Indian Health Center (RVIHC) community outreach department on nutrition classes, early literacy, and the Native Way Walking Amongst Youth and Yuki Trails Youth Activity days. Recently, the library partnered with RVIHC physical therapist Emily Bruton on a Senior Power program, which challenges seniors of all fitness levels to improve their strength and balance.

The RVIHC, which has provided health care to the community for more than 50 years, holds its annual Health Fair every September on library grounds. The day features a walk/run in the morning followed by an opening prayer, music, free BBQ lunch, bingo for elders, traditional dancers, and booths from a variety of organizations. This year, the fair’s 44th, the library will have a table with new books and plenty of arts and crafts for children, says Bennett.

**A PLACE TO GATHER**

The handsome community room has its own entrance, so gatherings can be held after library hours. Monthly meetings of the Round Valley Area Municipal Advisory Council (RVAMAC) are held there, and the county sheriff, Department of Transportation, and animal control officers Zoom in on the room’s big screen to meet with constituents. In an area where neighboring towns are more than an hour’s drive away, this central access is critical to keeping community members informed and in touch.

County Supervisor John Haschak regularly used the meeting room when he was campaigning for the position. “The library would be the first place I’d go to,” he says. “It’s the center of the community. During my campaign, they would hold forums there and debates.”

Six years later, he’s a regular visitor—particularly on Fridays, when he spends time at the Farmer’s Market and talks with residents about what’s on their minds. “Pretty much everything revolves around that library in the town—the café, radio station, meetings, forums, parties, movie nights, you could just go on and on,” he says.

Bringing community together doesn’t only happen on library grounds, though. Round Valley makes good use of the Mendocino County Library outreach van, which Bennett says “is almost thought of as one of the branches.” It comes equipped with an awning, beanbag chairs, and astroturf to sit on during story times, not to mention a smoothie bike—a stationary bicycle with a blender attached that children and adults can pedal to power up, get some exercise, and make a healthy snack. People can check out books from the “honor lending library” without needing a

PHOTO BY TERESA DOKTER JENSEN