

Vartan Gregorian
Libraries are stations of hope
Carnegie Corporation of New York/New York Times I Love My Librarian Awards
December 8, 2011

Vartan Gregorian, President of Carnegie Corporation of New York, spoke to more than 300 attendees at the 2011 Carnegie Corporation of New York/New York Times I Love My Librarian Award Ceremony in New York City recently. The program, administered by the American Library Association's Campaign for America's Libraries, honored ten librarians who were recognized for service to their communities, schools and campuses. More than 1,700 library patrons nominated a librarian. Here are his remarks:

This is a special year for Carnegie Corporation of New York because it marks the 100th anniversary of the foundation Andrew Carnegie created to carry out his philanthropy during his lifetime and to carry it forward into the future. During our century of work, one of our proudest achievements is the part that Carnegie Corporation played in the first major cause that Andrew Carnegie supported, and the one that was always closest to his heart: helping to build public libraries. Mr. Carnegie believed that libraries are essential to the strength and progress of American society because there are three critical purposes they serve. They democratize access to information and knowledge. They empower local communities. But most importantly, they empower individuals to fulfill their aspirations and their potential.

Libraries are among the first and most important institutions in all of civilization to embody the concept of lifelong education. After all, nobody can graduate from a library—or wants to! Libraries do not give out diplomas. Libraries have no graduation ceremonies and they do not give exams. The only condition a library asks its users to honor is to do justice to their own imagination, their own curiosity and their own thirst for knowledge, and in the process, to achieve their own independence of mind and spirit. Libraries are also bridges that link the past, the present and the future. How fortunate we are to have these remarkable, almost magical bridges that we can cross back and forth on as we explore the times that have passed and dream of the days ahead of us, in the years to come. These bridges are inviting enough for an individual to stroll across and yet sturdy enough to support whole societies, whole nations.

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And in that connection, let me remind us all that in America, which truly is a nation of immigrants, libraries are among the most important links that immigrants have between their native country and the country they have chosen to join. Libraries are a place of acculturation, of civic integration, of learning how to be part of America without losing the part of yourself that will always remember the place where you were born. Hence, libraries are an invaluable source of the materials that help immigrants to steep themselves in their past while also building their future. Libraries enable immigrants to join in the life of our nation while allowing us all the chance to universalize ourselves. And for those who have become assimilated, libraries are a way to return again and again to the banquet of their culture and to have their children share in that banquet, as well.

For all of us, libraries are both the symbol and the living expression not only of culture and history and learning, but also of the heritage of humankind. Walk down the aisles of a library and you are traveling through the record of civilization, its triumphs and failures, its legacy of intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements. Hence, the library represents humanity's collective memory. It is more than just a repository: it is truly an instrument of civilization. The library is a laboratory of human inspirations, a window to the future, a wellspring of action. The library is a source of self-renewal. It is the link between the solitary individual and collective mankind. It represents our community. The library is the university of universities, containing the source and unity of knowledge. Almost everyone's life has been enriched by what they learned in a library. But libraries would not be the wonderful teaching and learning places that they are without librarians. And that is why we are here tonight: to celebrate librarians, who are the true keepers of the flame of knowledge. Librarians are our guides to knowledge, the ones who classify and clarify, authenticate and actualize our desire to find the tools we need to educate ourselves and to become educated individuals. Even in the age of the Internet, librarians are the men and women who help us to find our way along the electronic

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highway, and there are no more intellectually rigorous, imaginative, and professional tour guides one could find, online or off.

Indeed, that is the business of librarians: to help us find where we are going in life. And perhaps to go even further than that, because they are also in the immortality business as well as the enlightenment business and the learning business and the democracy business. They are also in the equality business because everybody is always welcome to occupy a library!

The many branches of a library are like many stations of hope and imagination. At each station, there is always a librarian there to welcome you and to answer your questions. So tonight, we thank all librarians, and especially the ten men and women who are being honored with the I Love My Librarian award. They are extraordinary people with remarkable skills doing an irreplaceable job. We extend our gratitude to them, and offer our boundless congratulations.