

Andrew Levinsohn

Friends of the Library Essay

My earliest memory of the library is from when I was five years old, dressed as a lion, parading past the stacks of books and tables, roaring at fellow patrons who smiled and waved back. I had the time of my life. This pivotal Halloween spent at the Mahwah Public Library was just one of the moments in which the library became a place I could experience both adventure and learning. Between the story times, parades, and playing on the computers, the library felt like a second home. It inspired me to seek out ways to connect and contribute. Those library experiences led me to be an active part of any community I'm in, and seek out connections wherever I go.

When my family moved to Upper Saddle River at the start of my fourth-grade school year, I didn't know anyone in this new school or this town. The uncertainty motivated me to find a place I felt comfortable in, the town library. At the Upper Saddle River Public Library, I found friendly staff members, and soon, my afternoons were spent burrowed into science books. I even carried a piece of that library magic home with me, as I shared Friday night movie rentals with my family, and shared stories from our days. Some of my best middle school memories involve biking with friends to the library after track practice, and heading to see Ms. Debby in the Teen Club to play games and share laughs. It was a community, and it gave me back the connections I needed. My school library, Cavallini, offered even more chances to connect, as I joined the Battle of the Books competition. Not only did this strengthen my teamwork, but it also inspired me to push myself to improve to do better. These early library experiences shaped core principles I carry with me today, including the importance of community and the value of connectivity with others.

As I transitioned to high school, I found myself once again in a new environment, with new challenges and opportunities. I knew I was ready, as my time spent in libraries had helped me prepare. I knew how to find my place, build connections, and contribute to the community around me. I threw myself into high school life, joining clubs that I continued with throughout my years at Northern Highlands Regional High School. I became a proud member of the Cross-Country team, which allowed me to foster a new running community. But it was my role as the Northern Highlands Mascot, The Scotty Dogg, that truly marked the culmination of everything I had learned about connection and self-expression. Thinking back to my early Halloween days at the Mahwah Public Library, running around in a lion costume, I was prepared to embrace this mascot role, stepping into something with confidence, and making others smile. That early experience taught me the importance of how a costume could bring people together, make memories, and create a sense of joy. Wearing the mascot allows me to uplift others and share joy. One of my more powerful moments came during a critical game. Sensing the moment, I sprang into action, fist-bumping fans and rallying the crowd. The excitement surged, and soon enough, our team won the game. That victory wasn't just a triumph on the field; it was a victory for the entire school community, sharing a moment of collective spirit.

That spirit of unity and service carried me through my journey in the National Honor Society (NHS) at Northern Highlands. I was driven by the same desire to give back that had been nurtured in me by the library community. Through countless hours of volunteering, I became the NHS advisor for USR Tech Time, coordinating community service projects and assisting visitors

with tech support. Coordinating with Ms. Debby was another way I could pay forward the support I had received. My effort spread to other libraries. Using my position as the president of the Harry Potter Club, I helped coordinate the club's volunteering at the Waldwick Library, bringing joy to kids and keeping their energy high. The library had always been a place of welcome for me, and now, I can offer the same sense of belonging to others.

Libraries have shaped me in ways that matter most to me, including community and service. They have been my foundation, my source of growth, and the backdrop for the person I've become: a mascot, a leader, and a community member. Every segment of my life has been touched by the libraries that welcomed me, and I'm happy to give back and do the same for others wherever they may be.