



PRESS RELEASE

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Hartford Public Library Names Kellie Willis The Recipient of the Caroline M. Hewins Scholarship

HARTFORD – Hartford Public Library announces Kellie Willis of St. Louis, MO as the 2020 recipient of the Caroline M. Hewins Scholarship, given to promising library school students who intend to become children’s librarians.

Kellie works for the St. Louis County Library system as a Youth Services Specialist and is a member of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.

“I am impressed by Kellie’s commitment to children’s library service and hope she continues to follow this path. As a former children’s librarian, I know how rewarding this area of librarianship can be. She is certainly off to a great start,” said Bridget Quinn-Carey, HPL’s president and CEO.

“Kellie's passion for her community and her ability to recognize the many roles a children's librarian can play in the life of a child made her application stand out. I have no doubt she will be a leader in the field of librarianship,” said Marie Jarry, HPL’s director of public services.

Willis is a native of St. Louis, MO and is the Youth Services Specialist at the Natural Bridge Branch of the St. Louis County Library. Kellie is an MLIS student at the University of Missouri-Columbia with a focus on Library Services to children and teens. She loves when the kids at her branch call her the “Library Lady”! Kellie is a member of Missouri Library Association and Black Caucus of American Library Association. A proud AmeriCorps alum, Kellie’s interests include the ways that Libraries are actively working for more just and inclusive communities and #ownvoices children’s literature.

“My desire is for children in under-resourced communities like my own to see a librarian who looks like them, who advocates for them, and who connects them to library materials and programs that speak to their experiences,” Willis said.

The Caroline M. Hewins Scholarship Fund was established in 1926 as a tribute to one of the great pioneers in American Librarianship in special recognition of her creative work for children throughout the country.

The Fund originated by the Hartford Librarian's Club as a personal gift to Miss Hewins on the occasion of her fiftieth anniversary as Librarian of the Hartford Public Library. When Miss Hewins chose to use this gift as a basis for a scholarship award, generous contributions were received from family and friends and professional associates throughout Connecticut and the United States, thus assuring to the Scholarship a national character in keeping with the memory of the Librarian it honors.

The scholarship is open to those who plan to specialize in library work with children: who have received, or are about to receive a four-year undergraduate degree; and who have applied for admission to a library school or are already attending a library school accredited by the American Library Association.

For more information about the scholarship, visit <https://www.hplct.org/about/caroline-m-hewins-scholarship>.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KELLIE WILLIS

What inspired you to pursue librarianship as a career?

Libraries have felt like home to me for a long time. I've felt a vocation to work in libraries since my teenage years, but I didn't take it seriously. My neighborhood library was my safe space as a child and as a teen I volunteered there. Then in high school and in college I worked on campus in the library. I always wanted to be where the books are, because that's where I felt most comfortable and inspired. I studied Cultural Anthropology at Marquette University, served in AmeriCorps, then worked for non-profits in Chicago and St. Louis for 15 years. When Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson, MO, near my home community, I was so moved by the work of activists and organizers on the ground and also by the work of the Ferguson Public Library. These acts of radical love led me back to where I could best use my gifts to make a difference in my community -that's why I want to be a librarian!

Do you have a moment in your life where a library or a librarian helped or inspired you?

I worked in my high school library for a few hours each week and developed a strong relationship with our librarian-Kathleen Fernandes. Kathleen (at Crossroads College Prep we called our teachers by their first names) was witty, kind and encouraged students to learn as much about library resources as possible. She asked me then if I considered a career in libraries and I didn't seriously consider it at the time. I should have listened to Kathleen! She lives in Washington State now, but we still keep in touch. I am so grateful for her influence and example! I hope I can make a difference in the lives of the kids and teens at my library the same way that she impacted me.

What are your priorities as a librarian?

Connecting the kids and teens we serve with #ownvoices literature and diverse authors and illustrators who are telling their own stories. As a black woman, serving a primarily black community, where I live, connecting my community to as many resources as possible is important to me. Using a Critical Librarianship framework for my MLIS courses and experiences working in a public library so that as a librarian I am actively working against oppression. Also, advocating for libraries as community, non-neutral, inclusive, trauma-informed spaces.

Any good book/podcast/other media suggestions for us?

The impossible question! I love all things written by Octavia Butler. Her Earthseed Series ("Parable of the Sower" and "Parable of the Talents") is a post-apocalyptic tale written in the 1990s that eerily reflects what is happening in our world today. The amazing Adrienne Maree Brown -author, activist, culture worker- edited an insightful short story collection, "Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories and Social Justice Movements" that celebrates Octavia's legacy and uses her framework for looking at these intersections. Adrienne also moderates a podcast, Octavia's Parables, for a deep dive into Octavia's work.