



[ilsleypubliclibrary.org](http://ilsleypubliclibrary.org)

**Ilsley Public Library**  
Main Street, Middlebury VT | 802-388-4095

**Sarah Partridge Community Library**  
East Main Street, East Middlebury VT | 802-388-7588

January 27, 2022

## 2021 Annual Report to the Town of Middlebury

2021 was a transformative year for Ilsley Public Library. The challenges of the pandemic continue, but at the end of a year that could often feel dim, this report shines a light on the many improvements made at the library. Several long-term projects finally came to fruition, resulting in significant steps forward in service for the Middlebury community.

On July 1st, Ilsley Public Library went fine free, joining a growing movement of libraries that recognize how overdue fines can be a financial barrier to access and disproportionately impact low-income families. Removing fines is a way to increase access to library collections and services for those who need them most, and to improve the library's relationship with all members of the community. Existing fines were forgiven, and patrons who had been locked out of their accounts due to fines were welcomed back with a fresh slate. This exciting step forward was the culmination of two years of learning, conversation, and policy work involving the library staff, trustees, and local government.

July 1st was also the day that the library building reopened fully to the public. January through April, the building was closed to the public, and the collection was accessible via Outside Pickup Service. This disruption allowed for a reconsideration of ideal library hours, and an opportunity to gather input from the community on which times are most convenient for the most people. As a result, when the library reopened fully, operating hours shifted earlier, giving people a chance to visit the library before work. The library is now open 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Monday through Thursday; 8:00 am to 4:00 pm on Friday; and 9:00 am to 4:00 pm on Saturday.

The library's digital presence was transformed with a redesigned website, digital newsletter, and new online catalog. The new website is significantly more user friendly, and features improved navigation and search functions specifically designed to be tablet and mobile friendly. Users can find what they are looking for quickly and easily, no matter what device they use to access the library's website. The new library catalog allows patrons to search all library resources in one place; for the first time, books in the physical collection, digital E-books and audiobooks, and even streaming films from Kanopy are all integrated. This improvement in functionality will save community members time and connect people with the resources they are looking for quickly and easily.

The pandemic has heightened awareness of the digital divide in Vermont, illustrating just how essential access to internet is (and how many Vermonters do not have access at home). Libraries have long provided free internet, and this year Ilsley Public Library invested in a more powerful Wi-Fi system that can be accessed outside of the library building. This allows community members to access free Wi-Fi even when the library building is closed.

Improvements were not strictly digital: in the spring, thanks to a grant from the Middlebury Garden Club, the library's front garden underwent significant improvements. The project was a success thanks to many helping hands; UVM Extension Master Gardener, Barbara Blodgett, conceived of this new garden and spearheaded the effort; landscape designer and certified horticulturalist Judith Irven designed the new garden; and Tree Warden Chris Zeoli pruned the Chinese Elms on the library's front lawn. The library gardens facing Main Street look fresh and beautiful.

The pandemic continued to shape our service model in 2021. The library building was closed to the public in early 2021, and Outside Pickup Service was offered. In May, the library building opened the lobby for limited browsing and computer use fifteen hours a week. During this time, library staff trained on the Vermont State COVID-19 Portal and offered technical assistance to Middlebury residents registering for vaccines. In July, the library returned to normal hours (fifty-five hours a week) with the entire building open to the public. In the early fall, groups were again permitted to book meeting spaces, and limited in-person programming returned. In recognition of rising case counts in early winter, masks became required in the library building in December.

While checkouts are still below pre-pandemic levels, Middlebury proved once again that this is a community that reads voraciously. In 2021, library patrons checked out 58,465 physical items. Library staff paged 19,970 of these by hand during Outside Pickup Service. Due to the popularity of this service, we continue to page on request, even though the building is once again open. In addition, library patrons checked out 33,635 digital e-books and audiobooks, an increase of 24% over last year's digital circulation. The most checked out books for adults in 2021 were: *The Hour of the Witch*, by Chris Bohjalian; *Caste*, by Isabel Wilkerson; and *Golden Girl*, by Elin Hilderbrand.

For teens, the most checked out books in 2021 were: *Bleach* (a graphic novel) by Tite Kubo; *Fangirl*, by Rainbow Rowell; and *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas. *Mr. Wolf's Class* was the most popular book in the children's room this year, and author Aron Stienke visited the library virtually for a fun author talk. *Dog Man and Cat Kid* by Dav Pilkey was the second most popular. The most read picture book this year was *Bunnies on the Bus*, by Philip Ardagh.

The library started the year without in-person programming, instead focusing on digital programming, outdoor passive programming, and Take-and-Make programs.

Digital programming works well for adults, as it allows people to connect in real time, providing a sense of community. In 2021 the library hosted book groups and lectures for adults and teens via Zoom, and supported groups such as the Otter Creek Poets as they transitioned to remote meetings. The library began offering limited in-person programming in September, but most program attendance was at digital events: 1,427 people attended virtual programs at Ilsley in 2021.

Recognizing that remote programs do not work as well for children the library continued to maintain the Books on Sticks programs located in Riverfront Park and Harrow Way. These storybook walks are immensely popular with young children and their caretakers. After evaluating the program and discussing its value with local daycares and schools, the library has decided to continue operating Books on Sticks in perpetuity.

Last year the library continued to redirect much of our programming budget to developing Take-and-Make projects for both youth and adults; in 2021, the library distributes 3,635 Take-and-Make projects to the community. These project bags include an age-appropriate craft and instructions and can be picked up at the library and completed at home. Youth bags tend to focus on a STEAM theme. Again, after evaluating the program and noting overwhelmingly positive community feedback, the library has decided to continue to offer Take-and-Make bags as part of our regular programming going forward.

While the difficulties of maintaining a historic building are wide-ranging, the library's heating system remains one of the most pressing challenges. In 2021, the library placed six service calls for the boiler. Service calls are placed for several reasons, but most often because the heat will not turn on. Having unreliable and uneven heat in the building is a critical concern, as is the aging fuel oil tank in the garden. But the pandemic has highlighted one of the greatest shortcomings of the library's heating system: no ventilation. Unlike modern HVAC systems, the library's heating and cooling system does not provide any air exchange. What was before seen as a discomfort and inconvenience is now understood to be a threat to safety and an impediment to providing library services during a pandemic. Last year, the Selectboard approved funding for Engineering Services of Vermont to design a new HVAC system for the library. The new system, which will consist of cold-climate heat pumps, will provide more efficient heating and cooling and ventilation for the entire building. The library hopes to move forward with the project soon, hopefully as part of a larger renovation and expansion project.

In recognition of this and the many additional shortcomings of the current building, in 2021 the Selectboard created the Library Renovation/Expansion Working Group to review the Library Building Committee's previous efforts and make recommendations on how best to move the project forward. The Working Group was charged with creating a report that would summarize the previous work done,

highlight changes in the library or community's needs and circumstances since the last effort, and recommend key questions and considerations to explore going forward. The Working Group held eleven publicly warned meetings. All meeting minutes, along with additional documents, are available on the library website. The Working Group's efforts culminated in a report and a draft charge for a new committee, both of which were submitted to the Selectboard on January 25, 2022. The new committee, which will be called the Ilsley 100 Project Team, is charged with guiding the development of design options with a team of professionals, as well as coordinating funding strategies and community engagement efforts to bring the project to fruition.

Three longtime members of the library team retired this year: Jan Lyons, Susan Gowen, and Mike Racine. Jan worked as a cataloguer at Ilsley for many years, bringing expertise and thoughtfulness to a specialization that requires a great deal of skill. Susan worked at the library for twenty years, building our fiction collection and connecting patrons with books. If you have borrowed a book from Ilsley in the past decade, chances are Susan purchased it and Jan catalogued it! Mike Racine served as a wonderful custodian to the library, maintaining, improving, and caring for a building that can be finicky at best. The library staff wish Jan, Susan, and Mike the best in their next chapters.

In March, Brie Patterson was hired to fill the Technical Services position, bringing a wealth of cataloging and customer service experience to Ilsley. Brie has served as the cataloger at the Platt Memorial Library in Shoreham for the past eight years, and served as a circulation clerk at Platt for six years before that. In July, Hayley Coble was hired to fill the Circulation Librarian position. Hayley moved to Vermont from Minnesota, where she had previous experience as a librarian at the Anoka County Library, the University of Minnesota Library, and the Saint Paul Public Library. The library is stronger for their diverse talents and expertise.

2022 looks bright for the library, with several grant funded projects on the horizon. This winter, the Children's Room will be getting new comfortable seating, along with toy boxcars and sensory exploration wall units, purchased with grant funding from the American Rescue Plan 2021 (dispersed through the VT Department of Libraries). This grant will also fund the purchase of three tables with integrated power ports for the study area on the mezzanine level, and a charging station for phones and other small electronics. In the spring, the library will partner with Frog Hollow Bikes to continue the e-bike lending program. The library received a Climate Catalysts Innovation Fund Grant to purchase an e-bike, which will be added to the two already purchased by Local Motion. Finally, the library was awarded another Historic Preservation Grant, which will

fund half of the remaining restoration work on the library's historic windows. This work is expected to take place over the summer.

When Middlebury residents look back on this period of the library's history, it would be convenient to say that the library was 'closed' for the first half of the year and 'open' for the rest. But those who made it to the end of this narrative report will understand, as American Library Association President Julius C. Jefferson Jr. put it, "Buildings may not have been open, but libraries were never closed." The Ilesley Public Library remains a center of tremendous activity, energy, and community. We look forward to serving Middlebury in 2022.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dana Hart". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dana Hart  
Director