**Title:** How Local Libraries Jump Start Foot Traffic Downtown and in Neighborhood Business Districts

**Secondary Headline:** Libraries bring reading and fun to downtown

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During Summer 2020, Kirsten Aherron, main street coordinator with Altavista On Track, worked with Virginia’s Campbell County Public Library system to find local businesses interested in participating in a new kind of library program: A book hunt program in which businesses in both Altavista and nearby Brookneal partner with their respective library branches to place pictures of books in their windows.

“The idea is just to give kids and families something to do and get people to walk around town,” Aherron said.

This simple idea of combining books, businesses, walking, and creative placemaking, with local libraries as the glue to knit them together, is currently sweeping the country. Earlier this Summer, I wrote about how [this library program](https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/StoryWalk-through-downtown.html) currently exists in 17 states, plus one Canadian Province.

Does it exist in your community? If not, the easiest way to start it is to pick up the phone and call your librarian.

**Public libraries: America’s greatest experiment**

Public libraries are perhaps America’s most misunderstood social infrastructure, according to NYU Sociologist Eric Klinenberg. In [*Palaces for the People*](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/557044/palaces-for-the-people-by-eric-klinenberg/) he writes:

“Doing research in New York City, I learned that . . . everyday life in libraries is a democratic experiment, and people cram into libraries to participate in it whenever the doors are open.” (2018, 35)

The democratic experiment of the public library spans beyond its physical walls. And it exists in nearly every community. Over 95% of Americans live in a public library service area and nearly 90% of the funding for America’s over 17,000 public library locations comes from local sources.

As esteemed historian Wayne A. Wiegand puts it in *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*, people over time have loved their local libraries for three overlapping reasons: 1) the useful information they make accessible, 2) the transformative potential of the reading they circulate, and 3) the public spaces they provide and support.

**Embedding stories in downtown and neighborhood business corridors**

In this blog post, I’m focusing on how libraries before and during COVID-19 have knit together the transformative potential of reading with public space by embedding books and stories into downtown and neighborhood business corridors.

But that is not the only way that public libraries can support Main Street America members. Last year, Curtis Rogers of the Urban Libraries Council highlighted “[How a Local Library Can Jumpstart Cultural, Educational and Entrepreneurial Growth](https://www.mainstreet.org/blogs/national-main-street-center/2019/08/07/how-a-local-library-can-jumpstart-cultural-educati),” and we also see libraries fulfill this role during COVID-19. In Edwardsville, Illinois, the Edwardsville YMCA, the Edwardsville Public Library, and the Main Street Community Center are [currently working together to help connect the needs of nonprofit organizations with community resources](https://advantagenews.com/news/edwardsville-initiative-to-assist-nonprofit-organizations-du/) during the pandemic.

Back to the main story: How have libraries and Main Street America members worked together?

In my state of North Carolina, the Appalachian Regional Library worked hands-in-hand with the Downtown Boone Development Association (DBDA) [to feature the book](https://www.wataugademocrat.com/community/watauga-county-public-library-dbda-host-storywalk-throughout-july/article_52bd6e6a-ee9e-5aeb-a59e-81002a8b9997.html) “A Isn’t for Fox: An Isn’t Alphabet” by Wendy Ulmer in the windows of local businesses during Summer 2020. Families walk the downtown corridor to read the book. Since each page stands alone, families can enjoy the content wherever they enter this immersive literacy experience.

The DBDA and the library have in fact worked together for nearly a decade. In 2012, the partners started working together on [an annual program](https://www.hcpress.com/news/weekend-roundup-things-to-do-this-weekend-in-the-high-country-check-em-out-make-plans-dec-13-15.html) in which every December holiday-themed books would be posted in the windows of local businesses. Since then, the DBDA and the library have worked on holiday, summer, and even Easter StoryWalks downtown.

This idea slowly started spreading around the country. In 2017, Gardiner Main Street worked with Gardiner Public Library to start a downtown StoryWalk. Diana Twombly, program coordinator at Gardiner Main Street, said the program had two goals: promoting family literacy and introducing people to what businesses in downtown Gardiner have to offer.

**An accelerating trend during COVID-19**

This grassroots activity in communities across the country accelerated dramatically during 2020, when libraries and businesses were in many cases closed to the public for months on end.

During these unprecedented times, libraries and Main Street Associations came together to bring people back to downtown, safely.

In Wisconsin, Appleton Downtown worked with the Appleton Public Library to bring this program to their community. According to Appletown Downtown’s [website](https://appletondowntown.org/downtown-creates/) “StoryWalk® combines family time, physical activity, and reading. Follow this month's story, Drum Dream Girl by Margarita Engle, page-by-page posted in windows along College Ave.”

In New York, Downtown Albany Business Improvement District (BID) worked with The Albany Public Library to bring this program to their community. Albany’s program also builds upon the BID’s commitment to public art. They worked with the library to ensure that the book selected, *Bedtime for Sweet Creatures*, features the art of artist Elizabeth Zunon, whose work, according to the [BID](https://downtownalbany.org/news/take-storywalk-around-downtown) “can also been seen around Downtown as part of the Capital Walls and Downtown is Pawsome public art projects.”

In addition to working with downtown Albany, the library also worked with neighborhood BIDs. The library worked with the Lake Street Business Improvement District, the Delaware Area Neighborhood Association, the City of Albany, and [others](https://www.albanypubliclibrary.org/blog/7-neighborhood-storywalks-for-families/), to ensure that StoryWalks were available not only in downtown business corridors, but in business districts throughout the city.

In Los Angeles, California, the Los Feliz Branch Library worked with businesses in the Vermont and Hillhurst avenues area to mount oversized pages of the book “All in a Day” ­displayed on shop windows.

In Branford, Connecticut, the library offered its third annual downtown StoryWalk in Summer 2020. After the first program in 2018, “downtown merchants quickly embraced it as an annual summer event,” [according](https://www.zip06.com/profile/20200624/lemire-helps-bring-storywalk-to-downtown-branford) to local reporter Pam Johnson.

In Iowa, the Shenandoah Chamber and Industry Association [teamed up](https://www.kmaland.com/news/shendandoah-story-walk-commemorates-major-anniversary/article_c9eaf664-d673-11ea-9b4e-7b4b5d27bdb5.html) with the library to make this program happen.

In Ohio, the Birchard Public Library teamed up with Downtown Fremont to offer [StoryWalk Weekends](https://www.facebook.com/events/birchard-public-library-fremont-oh/storywalk-weekends/246549126638659/): Each Friday night, a new story was available in the windows of local businesses all summer long. To encourage participation, each week one of those businesses had a secret code for participants to earn a badge & a raffle prize entry in the library’s summer reading program.

In West Virginia, the Greenbrier County Public Library [worked with](https://woay.com/greenbrier-county-public-library-partners-on-downtown-story-walk/) the Greenbrier County Commission, Visitors Bureau and downtown merchants on a Story Walk.

In Texas, Downtown Wichita Falls teamed up with the public library for a [downtown Storybook Stroll](https://www.newschannel6now.com/2020/08/31/storybook-stroll-runs-all-through-september/). Like many other communities, this partnership chose to feature a book featuring the local community, in this case [*Finding Fallstown*](https://www.texomashomepage.com/news/local-news/local-childrens-book-features-wichita-falls-landmarks/), a children’s book featuring Wichita Falls landmarks.

Back in North Carolina, the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library teamed up with the Yancey Chamber of Commerce to bring “I Walk with Vanessa: A Story about a Simple Act of Kindness” to downtown.

**A flexible program for times that require flexibility**

Don’t think that these programs have to only be for children and their caregivers. In Greenfield, Massachusetts, the library worked with the Greenfield Literacy Project [to feature poems written](https://www.recorder.com/Food-poetry-downtown-26192347) by adult literacy learners in 12 local businesses downtown. The PoetryWalk is the teen/adult variant of the StoryWalk program, and has also popped up in [Washington State](https://www.nps.gov/olym/learn/news/nols-and-olympic-national-park-to-offer-third-season-of-poetry-walks.htm), among other locations.

This is a flexible program that can and should be tailored to the unique needs of your community. Within the simple idea of combining reading and public space, myriad opportunities are available. When you reach out to your local library to kick off this partnership, be open to brainstorming about what can be done in your community.

The StoryWalk Project was started by retired public health professional Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, VT, in collaboration with the Kellogg-Hubbard Library and the Vermont Bicycle & Pedestrian Coalition. StoryWalk® is a registered service mark owned by Ferguson, whose only requirement for use is that [StoryWalk programs](https://www.kellogghubbard.org/storywalk) never require participants pay to experience them.

Teaming up with your local library to bring stories to downtown businesses is a great way to build community, build partnerships, and bring your members together to work collectively towards a common goal. Try it out in your community!

**Captions:**

Albany.JPEG - In New York, Downtown Albany Business Improvement District (BID) worked with The Albany Public Library a book featuring local artist Elizabeth Zunon into downtown.

AMYRegional.JPEG – In North Carolina, the library worked with the Chamber of Commerce to bring a message of hope to downtown during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Boone.JPEG – A StoryWalker hits the streets of downtown, Boone, North Carolina, to enjoy the story made possible by a collaboration between the local library and the Downtown Boone Development Association (DBDA). Over the last ten years, the partners have worked together to bring over 15 StoryWalk programs to downtown.

Ellsworth.JPEG – Kids enjoy a downtown StoryWalk in Ellsworth, Wisconsin.

Fremont.JPEG - In Ohio, the Birchard Public Library teamed up with Downtown Fremont to offer StoryWalk Weekends: Each Friday night, a new story was available in the windows of local businesses all summer long during 2020.

WichitaFalls.PNG – In Texas, these partners featured Finding Fallstown, a children’s book featuring Wichita Falls landmarks.

**Author Bio:** Noah Lenstra is an Assistant Professor of Library & Information Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he founded and currently directs Let’s Move in Libraries. With funding from the U.S. Institute of Museum & Library Services (RE-246336-OLS-20) he is currently running a research project to answer "How, why, and with what impacts do public libraries collaborate with others to co-develop programming around healthy eating and active living?"