

Cecil County Life: Q&A with Rachel Fox Wright

From the time she was appointed as the new Executive Director of the Cecil County Public Library (CCPL) earlier this year, Rachel Fox Wright focused her energy on advancing the definition, purpose and mission of the six library branches and two Bookmobiles within the county's library system. Recently, she met with Cecil County Life to discuss the broadening role libraries play, the system's outreach initiatives and her deep and abiding connection to inspiring children.



Picture Courtesy of Cecil County Life

Cecil County Life: In January of this year, you were appointed as the new Executive Director of the Cecil County Public Library and began what has become nearly a year of prioritizing community, innovations, outreach and partnerships. Talk about the developments that you, your staff and the CCPL Board of Trustees have made thus far in 2025.

Rachel Fox Wright: As an organization, we are in the middle of our strategic plan, which prioritizes community innovation, outreach, and partnerships. So, while these are important to me, they are also important to the Library. I was fortunate enough to help develop the plan and to have worked on many initiatives over the last few years to move that plan forward. Our strategic plan serves as our playbook, and it lights the way for the things that we're going to do as a system and what we will prioritize. Some of those initiatives are already underway. Our mission is to not only champion reading, build knowledge and inspire curiosity, but to also connect the community. One way that we've achieved that over the last eight months is to host community events. One of our largest events over the past couple of years has been our children's book festival, which is held on the second Saturday of every June. This year, we invited 15 authors and illustrators who spent time meeting with the more than 1,300 people who attended the festival. Every child who attended selected a free book they could then have signed by the author.

We have also offered several programs that celebrate culture. In recent years, we have developed community events, such as A Taste of India, A Taste of Mexico and A Taste of Japan – bringing to light the stories of the people who live in our community and giving everyone the opportunity to come experience the culture, the history, the music and the food of these cultures, which is a wonderful way to connect our community.

It is said that at the center of every successful town, municipality or county is an effective system of libraries that connect families, schools, non-profit agencies and arts and culture. No library grows if it does not open its doors to other positive entities.

Where have we seen clear evidence of that relationship building between CCPL and the communities it serves?

One of the things I have always talked about is that in Cecil County, there is so much power in partnerships. All of the agencies in this county are working together in partnership to advance and better serve the lives of those in the communities that we serve. The vision of our Library is that it is the heart of a thriving Cecil County. That is our vision, and we live it every day.

One of our many partners is Cecil County Public Schools. We have long had this relationship with our schools, but over the past several years, we have developed a number of innovative programs including our student virtual library card. Through that program, students enrolled in Cecil County Public School have the opportunity to have access to the library's digital resources and collections to assist them in completing assignments, preparing for standardized tests, like the SAT, or getting help with homework. This initiative also gives our teachers access to those resources, for use in the classroom.

We also partner with the schools for our My Special Book program, which is designed to get books into the hands and homes of children ages birth – five. Research tells us that if children have access to books in their homes, they will be more successful in school.

With funding provided by a grant from PNC Bank's Grow Up Great Foundation, we purchase new picture books for the program and visit preschool and pre-K classrooms with our Bookmobile. Children can then select a book to add to their home library giving them access to reading materials at home.

How is the Cecil County Library reaching students at the middle school level?

We know that reading drops off significantly for children between the ages of 9 and 12. With our SPARK literacy initiative, 6th graders have the opportunity to select books from a collection that they themselves design. After telling us about their interests and the authors they like, we build a collection where they can select 3 books to keep and read over the summer. In this way, they are connected to the library, are engaged in reading and learning throughout the summer, and are better prepared to go back to school in the fall ready to learn.

In order for the Cecil County Public Library to adapt to the changing world, it must take part in digital transformation, community engagement, and the integration of technology. In other words, it must evolve in order to remain relevant. On a day-to-day basis, where do we see that happening at Cecil County libraries?

One way is to ensure access to technology at all of our locations – and in some cases, we are able to create spaces with access to specialized technology. Here at the North East Branch Library, we have our Digital Media Lab. While we use this space to teach

technology classes, we also provide access to specialized software, including the Adobe Creative Suite (including Photoshop, for example), so that people can create and design materials for the purpose of marketing a product or promoting a business or event.

Within the past year, we have also developed our Creator Studio Kits. In partnership with the Office of Economic Development and Upper Shore Regional Council, the kits give tech-enthusiasts, business owners, or entrepreneurs access to technology needed to take high-quality photos or videos or to host a podcast. We have also recently added a second bookmobile that is tech-enhanced, allowing us to take technology out into the community, to help people gain access to Wi-Fi and the internet, to assist them with resume writing or job searching. We designed the tech-enhanced bookmobile with input from our community partners and it allows us to reach into the neighborhoods and the places people are and get them access to resources and help they need.

Since you first joined CCPL in 2009, you have enjoyed many leadership positions, and I wish to talk about one of those roles, when you were the library's first Youth Services and Outreach Manager. Describe what duties you performed, and the satisfaction you received from that part of your career here.

My undergraduate background is in elementary education, so when I joined the library, I was coming from that lens. I started in youth services, and working in these positions allowed me to take a lot of those skills I developed in a classroom into the library. As the Youth Services and Outreach Manager, I worked with our youth services staff across the library system to develop programs and services to respond to and meet the needs of children, families, caregivers, and the educators in these communities.

I enjoy connecting people to the library and to the services and resources that they need. Having a background in education, it was natural that I performed that role in our youth services program first and then ultimately with all ages and the entire community.

We are absorbed in an age when nearly all of the data in the entire world is available and immediate at the push of a few buttons on a phone, and that ease of access has not only affected how adults obtain information, but increasingly, how children do. How is the CCPL working with parents and schools to address this new reality - perhaps not with the intention of keeping phones away from children - but to introduce them to other ways of gathering information?

The library's goal is to make sure we give our community, regardless of age, access to information and resources that are reliable, accurate, and current. Our digital resources are updated in real time and are relevant to the information that students need. By making sure that we have a vetted collection of databases, we're teaching them to search for and interpret information without relying on Google to do that for them.

Not only has the philosophy and mission of the public library changed dramatically over the last two decades but so has its emphasis on infrastructure. More and more, libraries are creating inspiring spaces. You've been responsible for creating a community space at the North East Library, the inclusive Music and Play Garden at the Perryville Branch Library and the Our Town Literacy Center at the North East Branch Library. Talk about how these spaces are enhancing the importance and the role that a library plays.

Part of our strategic plan is focused on Spaces and ensuring that all of our branches are accessible and meet the needs of the community we serve. In recent years, libraries have become destinations, where the community can go to find comfortable seating, specialized meeting or study rooms, and, of course, access to technology. Our libraries provide dedicated spaces for teens, especially in the after-school hours to socialize and connect with their peers, and also for families where engaging in early learning activities is one of the best ways to spend the day. And, now, with the addition of outdoor spaces, like the Music and Play Garden in Perryville, the learning and exploration can continue beyond the walls of the Library.

Talk about the libraries you went to as a child, and how they had an influence on you.

My parents are readers and have always valued libraries, so I have been connected to libraries my entire life. In fact, I always say my first library job was in elementary school when I served as the Library Helper. I grew up in Harford County, and the Bel Air branch was my home library. I remember participating in summer reading and attending lots of programs. As a teen, there weren't a lot of libraries with a teen section, but at the Bel Air library, they had that. And, now, having a space for teens is definitely a priority.

As I consider my own fond memories of being connected to my library, it reminds me of the conversations we are having here in Cecil County around the renovation and expansion of the Elkton Branch Library. Built in the 80's, the branch needs a new HVAC, roof, and reconfiguration of spaces to better serve the community, especially the students who are within walking distance from the elementary, middle, and high school.

As we engage the community in the planning for these spaces, we are hearing from people who grew up using the library and are now bringing their children and grandchildren there, so they are invested in making sure we hold on to some of what they remember. We engage and listen to the community because what we want at the end is a product that the community loves just as much as we do.

What is your favorite spot in Cecil County?

There are so many wonderful spaces in Cecil County. Other than our libraries, though, I

love being by the water, so if I can be on a bench near the water and looking out at our beautiful waterways, that is where I would most love to be.

You organize a dinner party and can invite anyone – famous or not, living or not. Who would you want to see gathered around that table?

My first reaction to this question is around family. When I was growing up, I was very close to my grandparents. They have since passed, so when I think about this idea of a dinner party, I would love to see my children at the table with my parents, and my grandparents. So, if you are giving me this really fantastical opportunity – to be able to see again someone you love so much who has passed – why would I not take advantage of the opportunity?

What item can always be found in your refrigerator?

Half-and-Half. I am a coffee drinker, and I enjoy a splash of it in my coffee in the morning, so it had better be there.

To learn more about the Cecil County Library and its branches, programs and initiatives, visit www.cecilcountylibrary.org.