

Kathryn Ashby and the Geneva (Nebraska) Carnegie Library

The Geneva Public Library blends Old School with New Kids. The circulation desk faces the front door, as is usual in Carnegie libraries. The stacks on that floor are not along the wall or perpendicular to it; they spread out as if a Chinese hand fan, so that the librarians from their desk can see down each row (so no making out, lovers). The library's computers are arrayed in a circle of tables quite close to the circ desk. The reason is clear. When I arrived, six boys were deeply engaged in a multi-player video game there under the librarian's watchful eye.

Not all library work happens within the walls. The Geneva Public Library has the "Secret Garden." In 1996, [Barbara Wilkins](#) – a member of the library board – gave the library the gift of landscaping. Over time, the money ran out and the garden languished, and so in 2007 Donna Fairly brought together a group (Pat Schake, Nancy Nichols, and Margaret Nichols, whose official title was Chief Weeder) to restore it. In 2010 the Geneva Library's Secret Garden was recognized in Nebraska's Parks, Recreation, and Environmental Awareness by the state's governor. The secret, it seems, is out.

Beside the library's front door – where two red bikes were parked, unlocked – stood a Serviceberry tree with a memorial plaque in honor Kathryn Ashby, who served as president of the library's board for forty years. When I asked about her, Molly, a librarian wearing a purple "Good Vibes" t-shirt, produced a folder containing articles about the library, including one about Kathryn entitled "She Has Always Been Civic Minded!"

Kathryn (Margart Sloan, often known as "Kate") Ashby was born in Geneva in 1924, the third of four children. After graduating from Geneva High School, she attended the University of Nebraska for two years, studying political science, before moving to Tucson, Arizona. She returned to Geneva in 1955, where she worked as a secretary for Hugh Wilkins, a banker. In 1958, she married Sherman Ashby, a mortician and farmer.

The tribute portrays Kate as the very model of a mid-century modern midwestern woman, who "has kept very busy during the last 50 years." In addition to her four decades of library service, Kate

followed all of her daughters' activities, from sporting events to speech, music, and drama performances. She was a Girl Scout Leader for many years, as well as being Cookie Chairman and serving on the Homestead Girl Scout Council Board. She was a founding member of the Fillmore County Historical Society, retiring from the Board after serving over 40 years. She was the Chairman of the 1967 Geneva Centennial Celebration, and spent many hours directing and participating in the activities of the Celebration...In later years, she was also busy following her grandchildren's activities, many times traveling to Plattsmouth and

other towns to watch Kitsy's children in sporting events and dance recitals, and to watch Carol's children in sports, music, dance, and drama. When she wasn't busy with her children and grandchildren, she kept busy with the Geneva Federated Women's Club, PEO [Philanthropic Education Organization], and the Fillmore County Hospital Auxiliary, as well as playing in several bridge groups. In spite of all these activities, she and Sherm found time to travel all over the United States, often being gone for 2-4 weeks in the Winter to somewhere warm. After Sherm passed away in 1984, she traveled with Jean Lovegrove to Europe, Russia, Alaska, Hawaii and other areas around the United States.

Kate was also connected, in one small way, via her grandfather Charles H. Sloan, to the Carnegie grant the town received. Charles, a Geneva attorney, sent the town's first request for a Carnegie grant in 1903. That letter went unanswered, and no other Genevan contacted Carnegie again until 1910. As Charles lived in Geneva until his death in 1946, when Kate was 22, I would like to think that she learned about the library from him.

America needs more Kates, and not just because she cared for her children or traveled internationally. She engaged with others to benefit her community's children, women, health, education, and historical memory. She may have felt social or personal pressure to join the organizations she did, or she may have joined them joyfully through her own love of service, or both. She certainly did not do it for the money, as all her positions were as an unpaid volunteer. Fame – even locally – seems unlikely; her name rarely appeared in the local newspapers. It may have been that as a member of the Greatest Generation she merely did what was expected: go to school, get married, raise children, join community organizations. Whatever reasons she had, the fact is that she chose to work for the betterment of her community, and she did so through much of her adult life. The more Kates our country has, the better it would be.