



Honoring Rivkah Sass
By Karen Wilson

(right) Rivka Sass enjoying Giving Tuesday at the South Natomas Library.



photo: courtesy, Sacramento Public Library

Rivkah Sass' Retirement is a Natomas Milestone

"I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture and our concern for the future can all be tested by how well we support our libraries."

— Carl Sagan

(right) Sacramento Mayor Pro Tem, Angelique Ashby with Rivkah Sass.

photos: courtesy, Sacramento Public Library. some photos: N magazine in Natomas.

Rivkah Sass will retire in January, 2022 after serving 12 years as Library Director and CEO for the Sacramento Public Library, California's fourth largest library system. During her tenure she has transformed the Library from a troubled institution to an award-winning example of what libraries can be. Her guiding principle is access for everyone. "I believe the role of the library is that we're the public square," she says. "You don't need money to walk into the library, you need curiosity. We facilitate curiosity and exploration. We look at how we can make life easier for people. That's really what we're trying to do." She has been a staunch friend of Natomas' libraries. On the occasion of her retirement, library supporters shared their thoughts.

Rivkah's involvement with Natomas began as soon as she took the job as the Sacramento

Public Library Director in 2009. Nancy Christ, Treasurer of the Friends of the North Natomas Library at the time, attended the reception welcoming Rivkah to Sacramento. "It was an instant warm feeling," Christ says. In



N magazine photo

January of 2010, Karen Thomas, then North Natomas Friends President, joined Rivkah at the speakers' podium to officially open the brand new library. Designed to serve Inderkum High School and the adjacent American River College campus as well as the community at large, it

was and is an impressive place.

The Friends of the North Natomas Library had traveled a long road to make the library a reality. Vicki Rondeau and Nancy Christ led the effort to create a North Natomas affiliate of the Friends of the Sacramento Public Library in 2005. They met and held book sales at the library's temporary space in Inderkum High School. Library funding became precarious when the 2008 recession hit Sacramento. Library leadership changed after a grand jury charge of fraud, and an interim director was appointed before the Library Joint Powers Authority Board named Rivkah as Library Director. Through it all, the North Natomas Friends continued to press for a library.

They found a friend in newly-elected City Council member Angelique Ashby. "When I first won the seat on the Council in 2010, I was brand new, learning

the role,” says Ashby. “I remember Mayor Johnson telling me, ‘Rivkah called and asked for you to be on the Library Authority Board. It’s a compliment to have someone with that much prestige ask for you.’ I think because Kevin said that to me, I always felt a little extra special about my service on the Library Authority. I gave it everything I had. A lot of trauma had happened before I got there. The staff felt jolted, the community was uncertain about the role of the library. To my eyes, it was clear that Rivkah was righting the ship. She inherited an insolvent system.”

As the city’s financial position worsened, Rivkah faced the threat of having to close the three



(above) Rivkah Sass plays with one of the children at an Explore and Learn session, South Natomas Library.

libraries in the system without bonded debt – all in Sacramento’s poorest neighborhoods. Ashby advocated for a \$12 citywide residential parcel tax, Measure B, dedicated to supporting the library, and recruited Karen Thomas to become the volunteer coordinator for the Yes on B campaign. “That was a very intense four to five month project, to get a 2/3 vote to pay for libraries,” Thomas recalls. “We won by a lot,” Ashby says. “People really did want to be there for their library. From that point



courtesy, Sacramento Public Library

YOUNG READERS FUND



An endowed fund in honor of Rivkah Sass that supports Sacramento Public Library in nurturing young readers

on I became a library champion and a Rivkah champion.”

That special bond with the Friends of the North Natomas

Library flourished. Rivkah attended all the Friends’ volunteer recognitions. The Friends’ bookstore inside the library raised thousands of dollars for library programs and materials.



N magazine photo

On December 11, 2018, the murder of North Natomas Library Supervisor Amber Dawn Clark devastated the library community. The shock and grief still resonate. Ashby recalls: “On the night that Amber was killed I was at a city council meeting. I got a message from Sac PD that shots were fired at Inderkum High School and someone had been killed. I left the dais as fast as I could. I had to tell Rivkah that It was Amber. Rivkah and I together told the staff that it was Amber.” Ashby says the experience has inspired her to advocate for gun safety measures as she mounts a campaign for the State Senate.

North Natomas Friends President Dolores Jones says that for months following the tragedy, Rivkah made counseling services available for Friends as well as SPL staff. “Rivkah made us feel valued, not only as volunteers, but also as human beings, and we appreciated that.”

Former Mayor Heather Fargo and Vicki Rondeau led the effort to build the South Natomas

(left) Lana Adlawan, Director of County Library Services at Marin County Free Library with Rivkah. Lana was one of Sass’ choices as the Director of the South Natomas Library.

Library, which opened in 2001 after a seven-year struggle to gain approval and financing. “Rivkah Sass is leaving our Sacramento library system stronger and more important than when she came here 12 years ago,” she says. “She has been a staunch advocate for the significance of libraries for students, families, the unemployed, those without computers, printers or wi-fi at home, the retired and everyone else. She has made the libraries relevant - through their collections, access to the internet and job searches, the safe spaces they provide, and the information and assistance librarians offer. Community libraries, like those here in Natomas, function as community hubs, meeting places, and a source of knowledge and entertainment. Libraries are critical components of successful communities and Rivkah made sure we all knew it.”

Rivkah has a deep interest in programs for children. One of the last programs she took part in as Library Director was an Explore and Learn for Family, Friends and Neighbor Childcare Providers at South Natomas Library. The Friends of the Sacramento Public Library has established the Young Readers Fund to honor Rivkah Sass and help the library nurture early readers into the future. Visit sacilibfriends.org to find out more, and to contribute to the fund.

Learn More

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