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

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 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 remem-
ber 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 pres-
tige 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 posi-
tion worsened, Rivkah faced the
threat of having to close the three
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 cam-
paign. “That was a very intense
four to five month project, to
get a 2/3 vote to pay for librar-
ies,” Thomas recalls. “We won
by a lot,” Ashby says. “People
really did want to be there for
their library. From that point
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’ volun-
teer recognitions. The Friends’
bookstore inside the library
raised thousands of dollars for
library programs and materials.

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 Am-
ber. 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 counsel-
ing 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
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 collec-
tions, 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 success-
ful 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
saclibfriends.org to find out more,
and to contribute to the fund.