

18th September 2015

The Library That Was Once A Church (2)



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Eiko Otake is photographed by William Johnston in the courtyard of the Russell Library during the afternoon before her evening performance.

It has been a busy week for the Library That Was Once A Church.

In addition to the normal busyness of library business, we had six major programs in five days.

The first was the first Friends' Book Sale of the season. That same weekend, Jazz Drummer Victor Lewis came to Noah Baerman's series, "Jazz Up Close". The following Tuesday our film discussion series opened. Tuesday evening we had three toy theater companies performing, one from Mexico City, one from New York City, and one from Berlin. Thursday, in addition to our "Jobs Group" in the morning, we had two evening programs. Our Veterans Writing Group met, as it does every Thursday, and Eiko Otake performed part of her solo series, "A Body in Places".

Let it be said that the reason Russell Library can produce so many varied and exciting programs is not because it is a wealthy library. It is not. The budget has been cut again and again. We cut back on hours. Our computers need updating, the rugs need replacing, and the entire place needs a good paint job. The reason we can do so many programs is because we have great people.

The staff at Russell is a mixture of town residents, professional librarians and other specialists, each having a variety of skills and backgrounds. For example, one of the staff is a master gardener. One is a former crystallographer. One is a motorcyclist. Many of the staff practice an art form. Probably the one thing they have in common is their workplace. Another thing they all have in common is that they care.

The staff cares about the community. If a child loses its parent in the puzzle box that is this building, a staff member is on hand to find him. If a person needs help with a computer function, a staff member is on hand to help him. If someone is having a bad day, a staff member is on hand to soften the blows of life's slings and arrows. And, of course, if a patron needs a book we don't have, we go to great lengths to find it.



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Eiko in the stacks above the main Reading Room.

Seen by many as a bit of frosting on a large cake, library programs can produce mixed feelings in an already over-committed staff. Yet, our staff has learned to be flexible and open to new ideas. They understand that not everyone may like every program. They've seen extraordinary successful programs, like the Veterans Writing Group, grow and develop. They listen to patrons, and suggest programs that the public may enjoy. They help out when needed, sometimes donating unique skills, such as baking cookies or preparing crafts.

Programming can be frustrating, too. When we plan a program that uses up resources, and it doesn't get a large attendance, it can be very disheartening, even for the normally upbeat members of staff who planned the program. Librarians are very familiar with taking this type of risk, and being let down.

Luckily this doesn't happen often at Russell. Most of our programs are very well attended. The concerts can draw anywhere from 75 to 100 people. There is a core audience for the film discussion series. Through the Friends Book Sales enough money is raised that we can afford many programs throughout the year. The toy theater performance had 35 people in attendance. There were about 30 people who followed Eiko Otake during her performance.

Eiko Otake's performance was unique. Most of our patrons did not know her or her work. In creating the piece, she wanted to relate to the "real world" of the public library, so we were instructed not to interrupt our normal routine. She discovered that our library – and most public libraries – are an "oasis" in the real world.*



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Eiko reacts to a slideshow playing on a wall in the Information area.

Her interaction with the staff began on Wednesday when she was rehearsing. She had various requests to which several staff members responded. This continued through the morning and afternoon of the day of the performance.

Some of these requests were fairly mundane: Could we provide her with books and a bookcart? Could the temperature in our Hubbard Room be controlled? Could she use the lobby monitor for the slideshow of Fukushima photos?

Some requests pushed the boundaries of what staff knew or understood about the nature of her performance. Would she be strewing the books on the floor, as she at Olin Library? Would it scare or harm the children to see the slideshow in a darkened children's activity room? How would our regular patrons react to her wandering through the library?

Before the performance, I asked the circulation staff to write down any of the comments they heard from patrons. Some of these were positive, some negative. "It was the strangest thing I ever saw", said one. Another patron, who sits daily in the main Reading Room, encountered the surprising performance with awe: "It was beautiful. It brought tears to my eyes."

One of the library's pages, following Eiko around throughout the library, commented, "It was the quietest the library has ever been."

It was indeed quiet. Even after Eiko had left the lobby, the circulation staff still spoke in whispers. The Library That Was Once A Church was experiencing something sacred, holy, powerful.

As the performance came to a close, and Eiko exited the library, someone began clapping. The noise was startling, foreign.



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The slideshow of William Johnston's photos played in a darkened children's activity room.

During the discussion that followed the performance, audience members were invited to ask questions. Several people were stuck by the accidental association that were made -- by a book title, or the tree in the children's activity area on which the slideshow was projected. The associations in the minds of the audience are amplified in such a performance. The reality of Fukushima, the reality of radiation poisoning, the reality of human error is seen again and again through many lenses and minds. Eiko's performance connects us here at our 'oasis' in Middletown to all the other places in which she has performed and will perform.

Having Eiko perform here was a big risk for our library to take. Each staff member showed a great deal of courage in doing their part, helping to set up the spaces she required. Children's Librarian Kitty Robinson was very cognizant of the stakes involved:

"If we (as librarians) do not takes risks, if we are complacent or quiet, we will not exist. We ARE the people. We have to stop being afraid."

*Eiko said this numerous times during the discussion after the performance.

**A video of the highlights from this performance is available on [Eiko and Koma's website](http://eikoandkoma.org) [<http://eikoandkoma.org/russelllibrary>].

Posted 18th September 2015 by [Rolande Duprey](#)

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Anonymous September 28, 2015 at 6:59 PM

excellent piece! I was not here during the performance but loved the video.... moving and dramatic

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