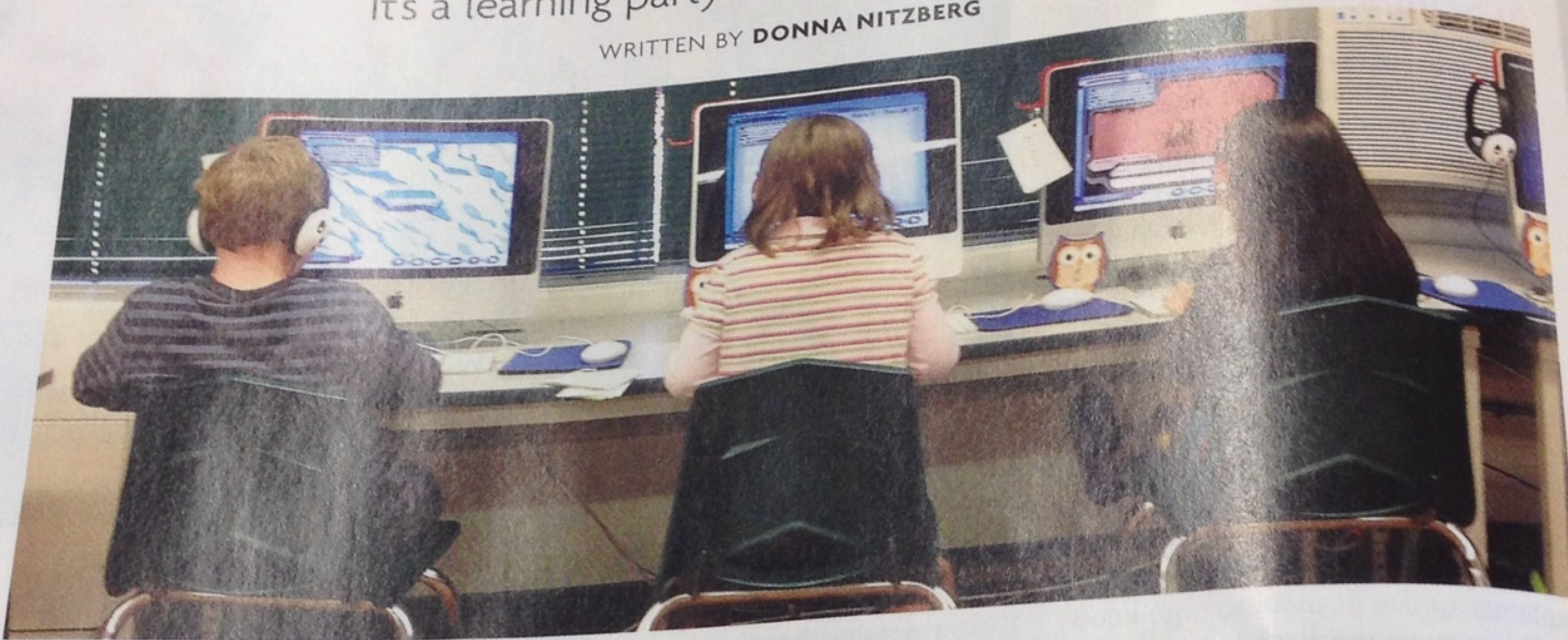


no shushing zone

It's a learning party in today's school libraries

WRITTEN BY DONNA NITZBERG



FULLY FOCUSED Students working at computer workstations

Late last spring, Aarathi Chava, a pretty eighth grader at Cavallini Middle School in Upper Saddle River, was checking her iPad in the lunchroom. She paused, stroking her long, dark hair as she perused a bunch of "friend" messages. Then, came a big smile that lit up her face, and Chava hightailed it to her favorite haunt at school: the library!

"I was on Destiny (a library website)," she explains. "I have friends (on the website), so they can send me recommendations of great books that they read. That's how I choose books. A friend recommended a book called *The Tiger's Curse*, which turned out to be a really great book."

Chava liked it so much, in fact, that she immediately wrote a four-star book review on the Destiny site:

"One of the best books ever to be

published!!! Involving a fantasy Indian legend and love triangle... 2 princes and 1 average American girl."

Elementary School

These days, school libraries seem to be brimming with energy and excitement. Contrary to dire predictions from just a few years ago about the death of the printed word and the end of libraries, many of our local school libraries and librarians have managed to shake off their sleepy old-time images.

Today libraries are often called Media Centers or Learning Commons and librarians are known as Media Specialists. Most libraries have been spiffed up and reconceived as vital centers where kids gather to learn all sorts of skills, have fun and even read some wonderful books. If you haven't spent much time at your child's school library lately, it's worth taking a look.

You'll probably be surprised at what you find.

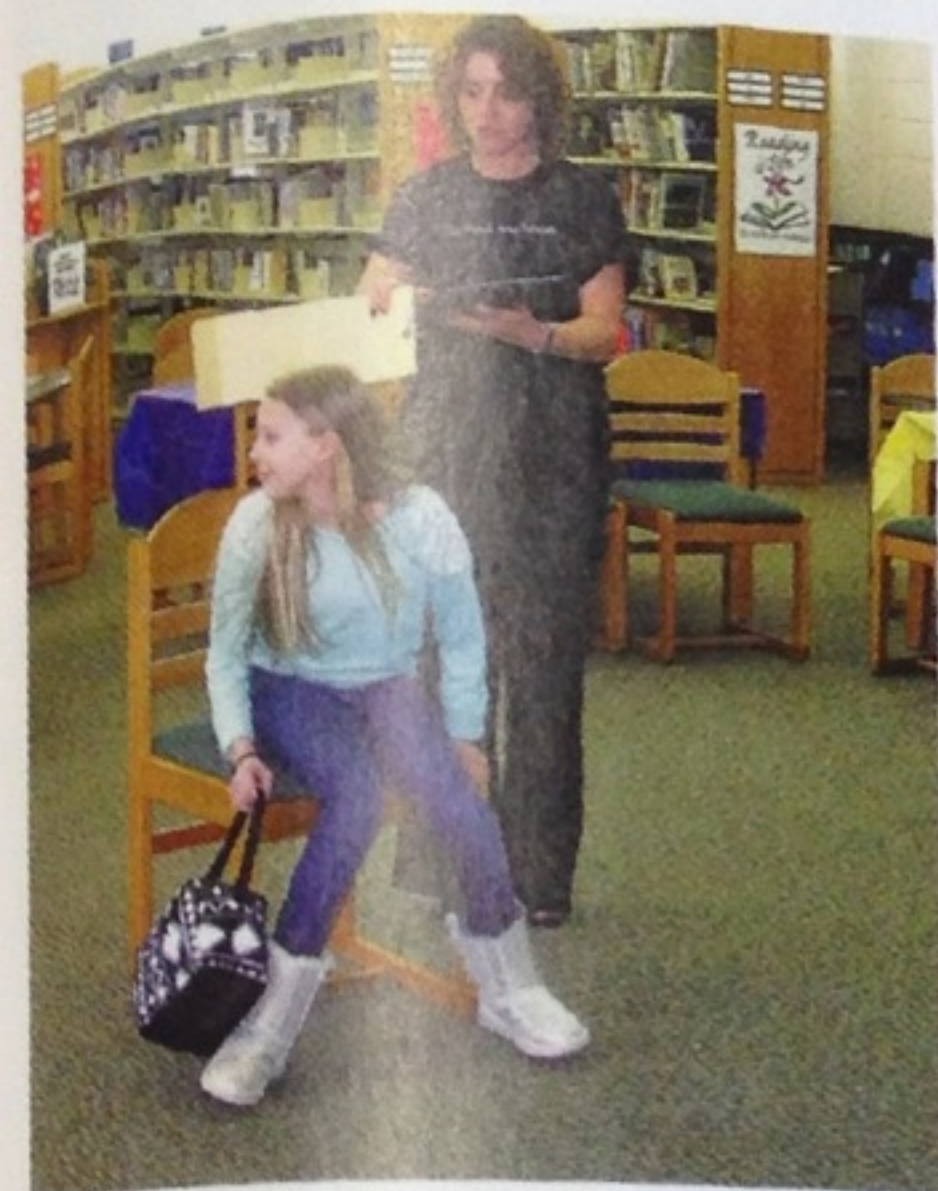
"When parents walk into my library, they look at the physical space and often say, 'Wow, I can't believe this is a library,' says Christina Cucci, the librarian at the Reynolds K-2 elementary school library in Upper Saddle River, a sweet little space with bright paintings on the wall and a fancy computer lab with 21 desktops. "And then they look at me and say, 'you're the librarian?' I'm under 40 and I think they're used to seeing the old lady with the sweater and the glasses."

Cucci believes that even though her official title is Technology Media Specialist, and she teaches early tech skills and how to find good information online, her most important job is to foster a love of old-fashioned literature in her young charges. "The children are just becoming emergent readers,"

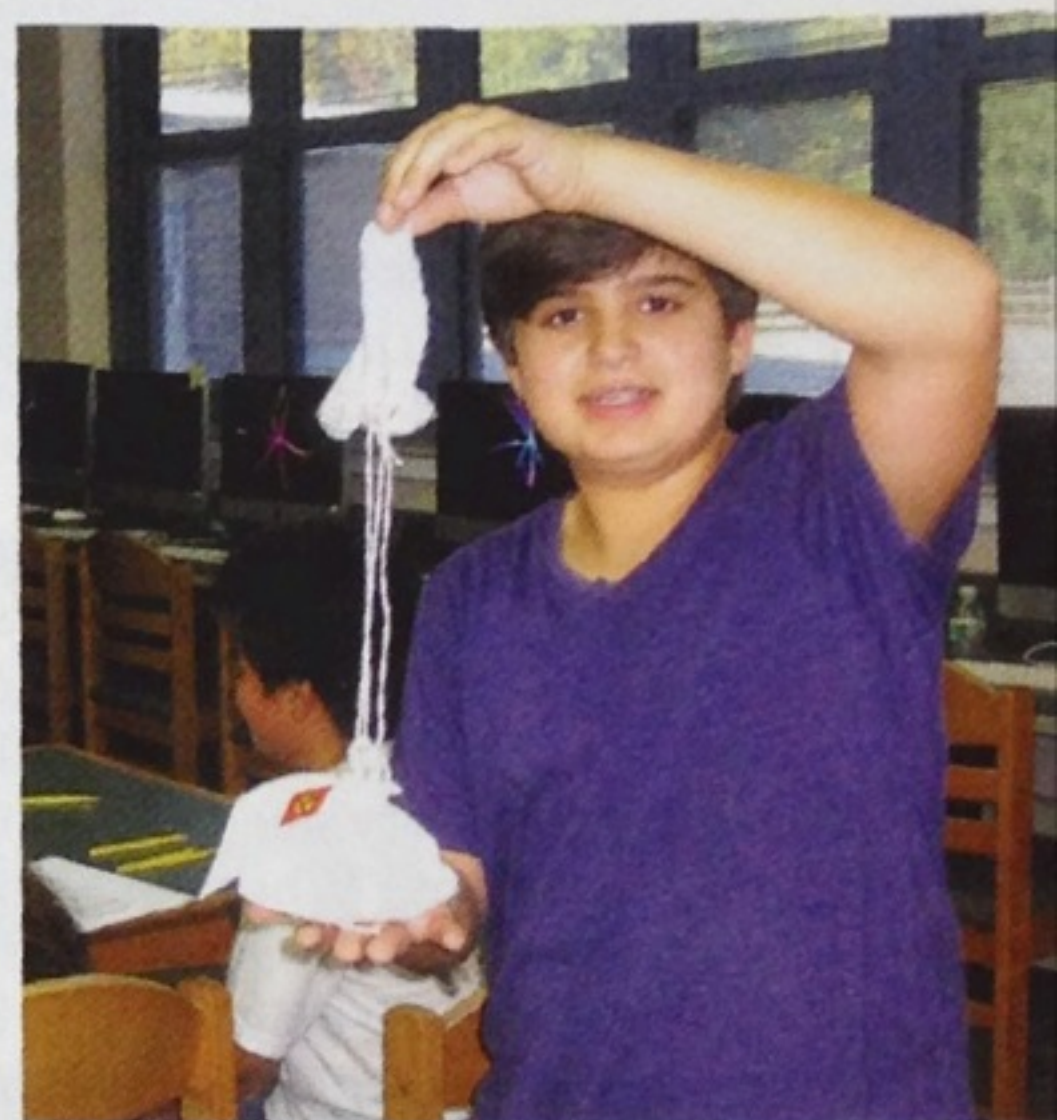
COURTESY OF CHRISTINA CUCCI AT REYNOLDS SCHOOL AND CAVALLINI MIDDLE SCHOOL



READING READY The library at Reynolds School



FUN AND FICTION A student gets up from the “chair,” as in the book *Divergent*, where each child is sorted into factions; librarian Christina Cucci at the circulation desk; and a student receives a parachute that replicates the parachutes of supplies in *The Hunger Games* during a *Catching Fire* book-to-movie event.



she says. “That’s really my number one job, getting them good sources of literature and reading to them out loud: Getting them to become independent readers.”

In her opinion, physical books aren’t going anywhere. Yes, Cucci began adding eBooks to the collection about two years ago, and yes, she’s excited about the high quality databases for younger students that she’s recently purchased for the library. But these are complementary to the actual books that still fill the library, and not replacements.

“My little kids definitely prefer the print books – holding the book, view-

ing the pages in their hands. And I don’t think that will ever be replaced,” she says. “But some of the eBooks do a really nice job... (with)... interactive books... that sort of meld multimedia tools. If you’re reading a book about a tornado, there might be a little video clip or an audio clip of what it sounds like in a tornado or what a tornado looks like. And it enhances their learning so that the students get more than just a still picture on a page.”

What about the emphasis now with the Common Core on nonfiction books? It seems kids are taking the bait, and reading a ton of nonfiction. “I think the kids are really eating up

nonfiction, because it’s written so well now,” says Cucci, discussing a trend called narrative nonfiction where the nonfiction is written like a storybook. “There’s a lot of really good nonfiction out there... and it’s circulating like crazy over here.”

Middle School

Traditionally, middle school is a time when lots of kids stop reading for pleasure. “Kids... become increasingly busy, even if they love reading,” explains Cavallini Middle School’s Library Teacher Elizabeth Ullrich. “So half my job is to keep these kids reading.” >



MAKING BOOKS COME TO LIFE Cavallini Middle School's Library Teacher Elizabeth Ullrich running a trivia game during a *Divergent* party

The social networking library site, Destiny, that Aarathi Chava so enjoys is one forum Ullrich uses to encourage pleasure reading. "I'm like the puppeteer behind it, so it's a very safe type of environment," she notes. "When you look beneath the surface, you can see a lot of interactions going on with the students in the building all the time even when they're physically not in the room with me."

Besides the online book reviews and recommendations, Ullrich makes special lists based on interests on the same website. An example is: "Books that make me cry." She – and the kids – also makes book trailers, which are not too different from movie trailers. Another cool technological toy that kids can use (with Ullrich's help) is something called augmented reality. With this, they can take a 2-D project or paper and make it look like it has three-dimensions. It can add lots of pizzazz to the traditional middle school science or health class project.

Surprisingly, pop culture has actually encouraged pre-teen reading – the hottest movies today are based on teen books. "The books these days that are made into movies are all the

successful ones from this age group," she says. "I mean, *FIOS (The Fault in Our Stars)* beat out Tom Cruise." Ullrich says that she tries to "capitalize on what is popular in pop culture, which ironically comes from our library." Over the years she's held *Twilight* book discussion groups, *Hunger Game* parties, and *Divergent* parties. Unsurprisingly, they're always wildly popular!

A newer, and somewhat controversial, technique used by some innovative school librarians to increase pleasure reading is called "genrefication" or the "bookstore" organization model. Basically, genrefied libraries throw out the Dewey Decimal System (at least partially) and organize books by genre. So, for example, if a kid loves *Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, he or she can go to a shelf with all the fantasy/romance books in the library.

High School

"I think it's a great way to attract attention and have kids visually and quickly be able to find books that are interesting to them," says Laura Fleming, the Library Media Specialist at New Milford High School. Still,

Fleming hasn't organized her library in this way yet. "It's definitely something I would do, I just don't have the time right now."

Why? Fleming's been too busy transforming the New Milford High School (NMHS) library into the hot spot at school, since starting work there at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. She's installed a coffee station and allows the kids to eat lunch in the library. "I definitely allow food and drink in here. I mean, my personal philosophy is once the children come here, I don't want them to leave for anything," she says. "And they handle it very, very well. We don't have any problems."

But perhaps the biggest draw at the NMHS library is the addition of a "makerspace" among the books and computers. A makerspace is just what it sounds like: an area with tools available for creation. "It teaches the kids not only how to consume information in a library, but also how to create things based on that information," says Fleming.

So, for example, in the NMHS library there is a 3-D printer where kids can make small items like iPhone >

EDUCATION

cases and toy models. There're also stations set up for kids to make things from Legos, to take apart electronic stuff, and to work with "Little Bits," which are electronic modules that can be turned into electric circuits and, then, small electrical items. And those are just the permanent installations where kids can work, mostly independently for short periods of time, to create something in, say, a lunch period.

"Part of the function of our makerspace has been like recess for big kids," notes Fleming. "After they're done eating, they have all this time on their hands and it gives them something productive to do."

At lunch, the NMHS library is often so crowded that it can be standing room only. "During the lunch-time hours, the library has a buzz to it. I won't say it's noisy," says Fleming. "It's a healthy buzz that represents the vibrancy of the space."

During quieter times, Fleming also introduces more involved projects that classes might do together or that might involve more mentoring and time, such as robotics and molecular gastronomy.

One of the reasons that she devotes part of the makerspace to robotics is that while there are robotics classes in the high school, they're only available to those enrolled in the engineering program at the school. "I wanted (to make it) so that everyone could get exposed to robotics. So to me it was all about democratizing education."

Makerspaces are white hot right now. They evolved from something called the "maker movement," which is about "moving from consumption to creation and turning knowledge into action." In fact, Fleming researched the movement before taking the project on, and found that its roots run back to a public library in Gowanda, N.Y., in 1873, when the "Gowanda Ladies Social Society came together to knit, sew, socialize, and talk about books."

At the end of the last school year, Fleming instituted a monthly program where she invited "makers" from the community to come in and share their

skills and accomplishments with the students. So far, a bike enthusiast came in and had the kids work together to repair a broken bike using mechanical engineering and physics principals, and a local farmer showed off her jams and cheeses and talked about pursuing passions in career choices. "It was really about how these interests, these hobbies, these skills that you gain from being in our makerspace, can actually be turned into careers later in life," says Fleming.

While the makerspace has been getting a ton of attention at the NMHS

library, actual books are still its bread and butter. "The kids do definitely check them out," reassures Fleming. "I would even go so far as to say that the circulation has increased because of the makerspace. Not only because they're choosing to come here more. But I have a section of books that are related to the themes of the makerspace. So often times, they'll develop an interest and want to know more. They check out books related to whatever they've been working on. I think that's definitely helped increase circulation as well. Yeah, we love books!" ♦



NEW ACADEMIC FRONTIERS The Makerspace area of the New Milford High School Library allows teens to think outside the box.

COURTESY OF LAURA FLEMING AT NEW MILFORD HIGH SCHOOL