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## Librarian donates 1,881 books to Plainfield library

BEICE PAGLIA. *Courier - News*. Bridgewater, N.J.: Dec 10, 2007.

### Abstract (Summary)

Besides being a family tradition, collecting books proved to be a service to the larger community.

### Full Text (706 words)

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PLAINFIELD -- One librarian had a lifetime collection of books reflecting African-American life and culture. Another librarian was in charge of a secure, temperature-controlled archive room in a city that values diversity highly.

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Barbara Polk Riley of Edison, left, talks with Jessica Myers, Plainfield Public Library head librarian, about the books Polk Riley donated to the library.

ANDREW MILLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Once the two met and began talking, the outcome was clear.

"I'm just happy they found a home," Barbara Polk Riley said as she formally signed over the 1,881 volumes Wednesday to the Plainfield Public Library.

"People are already coming in to do research," said Jessica Myers, head of the library's Local History and Special Collections Department.

Library Director Joseph Hugh Da Rold called the Barbara Polk Riley African American Book Collection "an extraordinary asset to the diversity collection for the benefit of future scholars."

Myers and Polk Riley began talking at a February 2005 exhibit at the library featuring photos from Plainfield resident Ethel Washington's book, "Union County Black Americans." A childhood photo of Polk Riley with her three sisters and her mother appears on the cover.

"Barbara walked in and started talking my language about collecting," Myers said.

But when Polk Riley mentioned a collection of 200, Myers said, "She meant 200 boxes, not 200 books."

Still, Myers found the collection easy to examine, because, she said, as a good librarian, Polk Riley had everything "immaculately in order." Even so, it took three days to go over every one before an appraiser came in to advise the library on the collection. It originally was more than 2,000 items, but Polk Riley took some back, and others, such as the emancipation documents -- "freedom papers" -- of family ancestors from Virginia, went to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York.

What is not evident in the library room temporarily housing the collection is the context in which the books were acquired. A daughter of Dr. Charles C. Polk, a 50-year general practitioner for whom a school in Roselle is named, Polk Riley grew up around books.

"We always gave Daddy books because we knew he liked them," Polk Riley said.

An uncle who was a carpenter built bookcases and then more bookcases to house her father's ever-growing collection.

"They ran down hallways," said Karen Riley, Polk Riley's daughter.

Eventually, Polk Riley took over her father's waiting room to accommodate the burgeoning collection. Her father's collecting began in the 1920s, she said, and she continued the tradition with visits to black book stores, such as the Lewis Michaud bookstore in Harlem. While working as a professional librarian in several historically black colleges, Polk Riley met many writers and intellectuals who helped shape the collection and inscribed books to the Polk family.

Black book clubs, such as the Just-A-Mere Literary Club, also fueled the family's interests. Polk Riley said she especially likes books about the Reconstruction era and also enjoys the works of black women mystery authors. She praised the late Newark librarian James Brown for bringing young writers to that library for many book signings and literary events that she attended.

Besides being a family tradition, collecting books proved to be a service to the larger community.

"The collection was used throughout the years as reference material for family and friends taking courses, due to the scarcity of materials available elsewhere," Polk Riley wrote in her description of the collection. "The purpose of the collection is to display the commonality of culture and the interconnectedness of fate, experiences and aspirations of people of African descent, especially the African American Experience throughout the 20th century."

Library patrons view the donation as a great addition to a collection that already is an asset to the city and region.

Washington, a researcher and historian who often uses the library's local history resources, said of Da Rold, "Joe has been very pioneering in pursuing and making sure the library has offerings of a diverse group of people, especially blacks. No other library in the county can top what they have been doing, with Joe's leadership."

To learn more about the Barbara Polk Riley African American Book Collection, call Jessica Myers at (908) 757-1111, Ext. 136.

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