



ILLINOIS LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Because Libraries Matter

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**Dawn Wlezien Selected as 2024 Recipient of the Illinois Library Association
Alexander J. Skrzypek Award for Exceptional Service to People with Disabilities**

Dawn Wlezien, Volunteer/Accessibility Specialist at the Skokie Public Library, is the 2024 recipient of the Illinois Library Association (ILA) Alexander J. Skrzypek Award for Exceptional Service to People with Disabilities.

The award is given to a person who has made an outstanding contribution to the advancement of library services for the blind or physically disabled in Illinois.

The award recognizes Wlezien's tireless work in serving countless people through the library: helping them to build relationships and connect to others, developing innovative programs, and sharing her expertise through professional development to other Illinois library staff members. Wlezien has developed creative ways to improve library services to people with disabilities and has deepened partnerships with community organizations in ways that expand opportunities to engage. The actions she takes stem from a desire for the broader community to see the potential, value, and capabilities of those she works with.

One of Wlezien's greatest areas of impact has been the development of the Let's Get Together Book Club. The club brings together participants from multiple Community Integrated Living Arrangements to read and discuss a book. The discussions are facilitated by specialty staff and community members, and when the group finishes a

book, Wlezien plans a special celebration for participants. For example, after completing *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, Wlezien worked with a partner in the local park district's theater program who loaned capes, chalices, crowns, and shields. Each participant took a photo dressed as King Arthur and received a copy of the framed photo to take home.

Program volunteer and community member Al Martin states, "Dawn is an inspiration for everyone that she works with!" and adds, "I volunteer because of Dawn's enthusiasm and commitment to providing an opportunity for adult people with disabilities to engage in a book club that values their participation and input."

Wlezien has also led other exemplary services and initiatives:

Vocational Volunteer Program provides opportunities to learn job skills and create pathways to independent living for people with disabilities. The program was created with local organizations in partnership with the Niles Township District 219 Bridges Program and Jewish Vocational Services (JVS). Multiple teams of volunteers serve in the library each week, with customized assigned projects in a work-like setting, with opportunities to learn. Feedback has been that this experience is the main thing that has prepared participants to work a paying job in the community. Further, Wlezien's work mentoring young people to learn job skills has led to at least three people with disabilities getting hired into jobs at the library.

Sharing Spaces consists of a social connection space for four non-profit agencies and their clients, adults with disabilities aged 18 and over. Participants come together with the goals of nurturing new friendships, helping participants develop social skills, and creating lifelong learning and recreational opportunities through library activities including video games, board games, puzzles, and art.

Dawn Wlezien serves as a leader at the Skokie Public Library and in the greater library field by continually dreaming up creative ways to improve library services to people with disabilities, sharing her ideas and experiences through conference presentations, and mentoring other library staff members. Colleague Rachel Bild states, "Dawn's impact on Skokie Public Library's services to the community at large and to people with disabilities in particular is, in a word, outstanding."

The Illinois Library Association Alexander J. Skrzypek Award for Exceptional Service to People with Disabilities will be presented at an awards ceremony during the 2024 Illinois Library Association Annual Conference. The conference will take place October 8-10, 2024, in Peoria, Illinois.

For more information, contact the Illinois Library Association.

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About the Illinois Library Association

The Illinois Library Association (ILA) is a professional membership organization that represents Illinois libraries and the millions who depend on them. Founded in 1896, it is the third-largest state library association and serves as a chapter within the American Library Association. ILA is comprised of 2,000 personal and more than 500 institutional members, made up of public, academic, school, and special libraries, as well as librarians, library staff, trustees, students, and library vendors.