

Toy Time

MPP student launches New Hampshire's first official toy library network

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MARISA RAFAL WITH SOME OF THE TOYS FROM THE STATE'S TOY LIBRARY NETWORK.

The New Hampshire Toy Library Network

First site: Dover Public Library, 73 Locust St., Dover, NH 03820

All toys cleaned with EPA-approved products prior to being loaned. Learn more at nhtoy.org

Toy Libraries in the United States

Toy libraries have existed in the United States since the 1930s, when the first one was founded in Los Angeles. According to the USA Toy Library Association, toy libraries provide “quality, specially-adapted toys” to children with disabilities and help parents and caregivers to “play with and provide play experiences for their children” while also becoming informed toy consumers. Currently, toy libraries exist in more than 30 states.

Marisa Rafal '19 has a passion for play. While working toward her Bachelor of Science in human development and family studies at the University of New Hampshire, she wrote a paper on toy libraries – lending libraries located around the country that lend toys instead of books. During her research, she found that New Hampshire didn't have a toy library on the USA Toy Library Association list, and she decided to fix that.

“Toy libraries are especially important in serving low-income areas and in providing families with an alternative to regularly purchasing new toys for their children,” Rafal says. “Plus, many toy libraries carry hard-to-find adaptive toys for children with disabilities.”

While creating the concept during her junior year for the state's first official toy library system – the New Hampshire Toy Library Network – she decided that the program shouldn't just serve children and families; it should support New Hampshire college and university students and the institutions they studied at as well.

“I wanted New Hampshire's toy libraries to be interdisciplinary and involve students from many different programs: occupational therapy, marketing, child development. Plus, by having college students run them, I saw it as a solution to keeping New Hampshire graduates in New Hampshire and stopping the state's 'brain drain'.”

Additionally, says Rafal, there's the benefit of children and their parents forming positive views of the New Hampshire colleges and universities from which the students who run these libraries come.

To help fund the New Hampshire Toy Library Network, Rafal received grants from the UNH Alumni Association and the Maurice Prize for Innovation. She also received a summer seed grant from the Peter T. Paul Entrepreneurship Center to work on setting up the network and apply for nonprofit status.

In August 2019, Rafal and four other UNH students held the grand opening for the first New Hampshire Toy Library Network site, located at the Dover Public Library. The team is already working on a Concord library, which students at the New Hampshire Technical Institute, Concord's Community College, will begin operating this fall. Additionally, the team – which includes students from UNH's family studies, marketing and occupational therapy (OT) programs – has been working with UNH's OT faculty to purchase adaptive toys alongside conventional ones for the libraries. Rafal also has plans for a toy drive to which families could donate their unused toys (instead of throwing them away).

“Long term, I'd really like this to be a well-known resource for New Hampshire's families, schools and communities,” said Rafal. “Pretty soon we'll have two pilot sites. But if it receives enough support, my hope is it will expand to the entire Granite State.”

Rafal is studying toward a master's degree in public policy from the Carsey School of Public Policy. An accelerated master's program student, she began taking graduate-level courses her senior year at UNH. She graduated with her Bachelor of Science in May 2019 and plans to work in child and family advocacy and policy development.



Rafal with Megan Estes, a UNH student in the Bachelor of Science in Human Development & Family Studies and the Master of Educational Studies degree programs.

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