

WITH KIND APPRECIATION FOR MARLEEN NIENHUIS

"A hero is any person really intent on making this a better place for all people." -- Maya Angelou



Marleen in front of the *Little Free Library Box* she installed in front of her home after the pandemic caused the closure of the Library

The Friends of the South End Library (FOSEL) offers warm thanks and heartfelt appreciation to Marleen Nienhuis for all she has done for the South End Library (SEL), Library Park and the neighboring community. As a direct result of her dedication and hard work, the SEL has become a more relevant, attractive, and welcoming place for all.

Back in 2008, believing libraries to be among “the most important civic institutions of a democracy” and seeing the unfulfilled potential for the SEL to be a vibrant community resource, Marleen spearheaded the creation of FOSEL with the aim of renovating the Library’s interior, reorienting the Park from a site of neglect to a safe green space, and creating programs for the enjoyment and benefit of the neighboring community.

When shortly thereafter the City announced a plan to consolidate and eliminate branch libraries, Marleen and FOSEL tabled these initial goals and redirected their efforts toward advocating to save the library. Happily, they were successful.

Once the threat of closure had been averted, Marleen re-focused her energies on making improvements, beginning with the outdoor space. Together with like-minded volunteers, Marleen set about cleaning up the Park, cutting back overgrown shrubs, replanting with donations from local nurseries, ensuring reliable trash collection, and organizing programming for both children and adults. This work eventually led to a full redesign of the Park area to include a central plaza with seating, an overhaul of the soil, a new butterfly garden, and the installation of an automated irrigation system. In the fall of 2019, before the landscaping was completed, Marleen oversaw the planting of thousands of bulbs, which provided some much-needed delight to the neighborhood during the 2020 spring bloom.

Under Marleen's leadership, FOSEL established a variety of successful programs including the popular author series, *The South End Writes* (bringing in celebrated authors to discuss their books), Local Focus Windows (featuring exhibits about activities of interest in the community), periodic Book Award highlights and displays, Easter egg hunts for community kids, jazz and blues summer concerts, and children's performances. In addition to creating these programs, Marleen managed their publication and promotion, building a membership for FOSEL, developing a newsletter to stay connected, and creating this website.

In 2016-17, when the Walsh Administration demonstrated an interest in renovating Boston libraries, including branches like the SEL, Marleen sprung into action, coordinating a proposal for a multi-phased plan to improve the Library's interior with funding from a public/private partnership between the Boston Public Library and FOSEL. Under the first phase of the plan, the existing interior of the Library would be "refreshed" and updated, with the following phase to see a much bigger renovation/expansion of the entire building. The refresh was successfully completed in February 2020. Today the Library looks wonderfully cheerful, comfortable, and inviting, thanks in large part to Marleen's tireless advocacy and unwavering commitment to energize the community.



Marleen took a personal, hands-on approach to the planning and execution of all of these programs and improvements, generously deploying her many talents as a trained journalist, accomplished artist, charismatic speaker, and even competent seamstress (at one point taking up a sewing needle to make new cushions for a seating area in the Library). She regularly put in full time work weeks on a purely volunteer basis.

As she prepared to step down from FOSEL, Marleen took pains to ensure the organization would be well situated to move ahead without her. She undertook a successful campaign to expand the board and recruit volunteer directors to continue the work she started. She also played a key role in establishing a large advisory board group, comprised of talented and committed individuals with a wide range of skills, who graciously lend FOSEL their expertise as needed.

Marleen's contributions to the South End community extend beyond her efforts on behalf of the Library. In addition to serving as the membership chair of the Rutland Square Neighborhood Association for several years, she was a key player in the transformative renovation of Titus Sparrow Park, working for years to make it an essential hub of family and recreational activity for South Enders.

Throughout her many years in the community, wherever she saw room for improvement, Marleen stalwartly took up the challenge of making the South End a better place. We salute her many contributions and celebrate her achievements.

-THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF FOSEL, 2020-2021