

# Gainsboro librarian leaves a lasting legacy



Photos by JARED SOARES | The Roanoke Times

Gainsboro librarian Carla Lewis (right) helps Samantha Barnett, a library substitute, find a DVD. In the 36 years Lewis has held her post, she has overseen a tripling of the library's collection and a near-doubling of its space.

**Carla Lewis** will retire this week from her post at the Gainsboro library, which under her watch has become a magnet for people from all quadrants of the city.



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**A**fter decades of nurturing the vision of Gainsboro's first librarian, Carla Lewis is leaving her post with her career goal accomplished: The legacy of library matriarch Virginia Y. Lee is fully intact.

But quietly and humbly and with an elegance that has come to define the Gainsboro branch of the Roanoke Public Libraries — a shining star of the system and black Roanoke's intellectual hub — Lewis, 60, has arguably made an even deeper imprint than her predecessor.

She's overseen a tripling of the collection and a near-doubling of the space.

She's documented the oral histories of aging black leaders, made the library a magnet for people from all quadrants of the city and mentored untold numbers of young people — including Salena Sullivan, whose admission to Harvard University last year she personally helped steer.

She's launched a monthly salon on topics as diverse as buying your first house, nutrition, great books and love.

When she retires on Thursday, tears will be shed. Regular patrons will line up to offer testimonials.

Teenage boys will take one more look at the lady who can shush them with a mere turn of her gorgeous head of hair — and fall in love all over again.

**"Cafe Night to Wish a Fond Farewell to Carla Lewis on her Retirement"**

**When:** 6 to 8 p.m.  
Thursday  
**Where:** Gainsboro Branch Library,  
15 Patton Ave. N.W.  
**For more information:** Call  
853-1057

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# LEGACY: Library patrons will bid Lewis farewell on Thursday

FROM 1

The library's mom is turning in the keys to her beloved Gainsboro building. But her spirit will long linger amid its stacks.

## Mrs. Lee's legacy

She's going home to the country, though it's not the rural North Carolina farmland of her youth. Lewis plans to retreat to the 90-acre Floyd County farm she shares with her husband, Peter Lewis, the founder, groundskeeper and director of Apple Ridge Farm, the nonprofit camp for at-risk kids.

There she'll read stories to little kids and perform puppet shows and assist her overworked husband in whatever way she can. In a way, it's a return to the duties she had when she moved to Roanoke fresh out of Virginia Union University in 1973.

She had wanted to be a schoolteacher, earning a degree in elementary education, but the former school library aide could not shake the Dewey Decimal's lure. She was hired as a librarian at the city's Gainsboro branch and, within months, she was running the place.

She sought out Virginia Lee, the woman who birthed the library, directing it for 43 years. In getting to know Lee, she learned the history of her new home:

In 1940, the Gainsboro Library was housed in the flood-prone basement of the old Hunton YMCA, the only place where Roanoke blacks could check out books.

City officials wouldn't pay for both the land and a new library building, so Lee mustered the nerve to walk up the hill to St. Andrew's Catholic Church, where she asked the priest to donate the land. Not only did the priest comply; in an official request to Rome, he also persuaded Pope Pius XII to give his permission as well.

Whereas Lewis exudes warmth, Lee's presence was formidable. Children were made to wash their hands before they handled a book, and plea-



Carla Lewis has reached out to young people during her 36 years at the Gainsboro library. After she retires, she will continue to mentor youngsters at Apple Ridge Farm, a nonprofit camp founded by her husband for at-risk children.

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## "I believe we were put here to give back."

Carla Lewis | Gainsboro librarian

sure reading wasn't allowed — until Lee checked to make sure their homework was finished.

She started a small black literature and history collection by writing to the likes of Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar, who sent signed, first-edition copies of their books. When the white-run city council of the 1940s advised her to get rid of the collection, Lee hid it in the basement, quietly dispatching items upon request.

By the time she retired in 1971, she'd collected 3,500 books for the library's black history collection that now bears her name. When she met Lewis two years later, Lee told her, "I'm giving it to you."

It may have technically belonged to the community, but in many ways it was Lee's to give. Lewis looked upon the collection not just as a responsibility but also as a calling.

"Carla has nurtured and savored Mrs. Lee's legacy, but very quietly and

humbly she has also established her own," her husband says.

Lewis did things such as hand-deliver books to patrons who were elderly and infirm. She worked with young parents and teen moms, encouraging them to stay in school.

And when one of her favorite charges left for college, she didn't think twice about sticking a \$10 bill in the mail.

"I believe we were put here to give back," she says. "And if you can't give

money, give some advice, give some love. A lot of kids out there, they just need you to tell them they can do anything they want.

"It's no big deal. You just do it."

## Legacy in action

On a recent day at the library, Lewis' legacy was in full stride:

There was 92-year-old Alphonzo Holland, reading the newspaper at his favorite table, as he does every day, the tiger lilies he clipped as a gift for Lewis nearby.

There was 53-year-old Denise Wimbush filling out an online job application. When Goody's closed earlier this year and she lost her job, she came to the library first for help. ("I didn't even know how to turn a computer on.")

There was the toddler working his puzzle while a group of teens nearby surfed the Web in the new teen center, part of the branch's recent \$1.3 million expansion.

"It's really what I love the most," Lewis says. "You've got teenagers, toddlers and Mr. Holland — all in the same place, all respecting each other."

That's why people will drive out of their way — past another library, even — to frequent the Gainsboro stacks.

It's why grandmothers will drop off their visiting grandchildren with instructions for Lewis: "She's here for the summer, and I want her to volunteer a couple hours."

It's why Sullivan, the 19-year-old Harvard wunderkind, worked the front desk every day during the first month of her summer vacation — even though city funds were tight, and she wasn't getting paid. (Update: A downtown administrator called last week; somebody somewhere found her some part-time funds.)

It's what makes the Gainsboro library arguably the most diverse, the most alive public place in town — and why the librarian with the relentless smile will be missed more than anyone in this corner of Roanoke can say.