

LIFESTYLE

Meet Mary Ellen Icaza, head of Stark County District Library

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Mary Ellen Icaza joined Stark Library in 2018 as chief executive officer and executive director. She is an innovative library leader who is fervent about making library services accessible for all. She has expertise in strategic planning, community engagement and library technology, and is passionate about early childhood literacy — a passion that extends into her personal life.

Icaza sees libraries as vibrant and dynamic centers of the community. She believes that libraries must re-imagine themselves to not only meet the learning and information needs of the community but to transform the individual library experience to engage, surprise and inspire creativity and lifelong learning in its patrons.

Icaza came to Stark County in 2018 with more than 18 years of experience serving diverse populations. She has a stellar track record of community collaboration to form lasting and beneficial partnerships and is thrilled to work with Stark County businesses, nonprofit agencies, schools and government entities to highlight all the library has to offer the community.

Icaza currently serves on the Public Library Association Board, Aultman Women's Board, Kent State Stark Advisory Board, Stark County Family Council, and the Ohio Library Council. In 2018, Icaza received the EPIC Award for Education from Montgomery Community Media, which recognizes leaders for excellence in creating and sharing within the community. In 2004, she was named a Library Journal Mover & Shaker and was selected as a participant in the 2015 American Library Association Leadership Institute.

Prior to joining Stark Library, Icaza led educational programming, community outreach and special events for Montgomery County Public Libraries in Maryland, a large urban county near Washington, D.C. She represented MCPL to county and state government agencies, local schools, partners and elected officials, and managed nine of the library system's 21

branches. Her programming expertise includes workforce development, business, early literacy, summer reading, children's, teens' and adults' and programs for the under-served in the community.

Previously, she was the Virtual Services Program Manager for MCPL, responsible for the development and implementation of all web and social media communications and new technologies for the library system. She led the system-wide development of an interactive online summer reading program that is now used by more than 200 libraries across the country. She also worked in web communications and project management in education and government.

Icaza earned a master of library science from the University of Maryland and a bachelor of arts in English (magna cum laude) from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Icaza and her husband, Javier, reside in Plain Township with their children, Christian and Victoria.

Get to know her a little better:

What book got you interested in your career?

It was a reference book, "The Readers Guide to Periodical Literature," of all things, that interested me in libraries. I remember going on a class visit to East Stroudsburg University (in Pennsylvania) when I was in middle school and learning how to research magazine and newspaper articles using "The Readers' Guide," a printed index to magazines and journals. It fascinated me that I could look up any topic in the index and find articles. It's now an online database, but back in the '80s, it was a multi-volume bound set index.

What is the book that shocked you the most?

Lucy Foley's "The Guest List" had a plot twist that I didn't see coming. It's a suspense book about a wedding in Ireland, and one of the wedding guests is murdered. It weaves in the history of the wedding guests and the present-day wedding for very shocking and personal connections as they attempt to solve the murder.

What is the last book you read?

Recently, I attended a conference in Columbus, and while driving there and back, I listened to Jennifer Armentrout's "Storm and the Fury," which is the first in a young adult fantasy series. I love discovering a new-to-me author and that it's a series! Listening to audiobooks is

a great way to experience a book, and I really like doing so when driving a distance, but it does make it difficult to get out of the car when I've reached my destination. Just one more chapter! To make it even better, I get my audiobooks free with my library card using the Libby app.

What section of the library or bookstore do you visit first?

I visit the teen (young adult) section first in a bookstore. I am a big fan of teen fantasy books – such creativity and pure escapism to other worlds, especially with all the recent stress during the pandemic. At the main library, I always head to the new books room first. The staff has done a beautiful job curating the books and creating a soothing vibe in the room with music and eye-catching displays.

What is the last book that made you cry?

“From Scratch” by Tembi Locke is a beautifully written memoir about love, family, loss and joy amidst the backdrop of Sicily. The author writes about her marriage, her love of Sicilian culture and food, and struggles with illness, infertility, family relationships and her husband's death. It's deeply personal, both tragic and uplifting at the same time.

What is the book you always come back to?

Matt Haig's book “The Midnight Library” is one that I read during the pandemic. The main character Nora is struggling to find any purpose in her life, and she experiences different versions of her life through books in the Midnight Library. Haig's writing is lyrical, and as a reader, I felt deeply connected to Nora as she searches to find answers and meaning in her life.

What is your go-to book recommendation?

I recently read “The Giver of Stars” by JoJo Moyes, which Sally Efremoff, one of my library board members recommended to me. I am so glad she did. It's a historical novel about the Packhorse Librarians of Kentucky set in the Depression-era. It's about the women's friendships and their commitment to their work in bringing books to people living in rural Kentucky. Not only was it good storytelling, but I learned something new about librarians providing outreach services in American history.

This profile originally appeared in About magazine. This is the first of a new series of profiles and articles on people, activities and resources at Stark County District Library. It will appear monthly in The Canton Repository's Lifestyle section.

