



One for the Books

How the Lower School Library Has Become a Hub for Joy and Creativity

If you walked by the wooded area near the Lower School last spring, you may have noticed children clustered there, piling sticks atop each other to make huts and houses. You probably thought to yourself, “That looks like a fun recess.”

Except, it isn't recess. It's Lower School library. And these fourth graders are actually learning about Native American dwellings in conjunction with their social studies curriculum. Lower School librarian Mrs. Nisa Kalambaheti spent the day prior helping students create plans for surviving in the wild...and now it's time to bring those ideas to fruition.

Gone are the days when young children went to the school library to just listen to a story. There are still stories being read, of course, but Cannon's Lower School library is creativity, defined.

“The library is not just a repository of books anymore. It's the place that sparks your interest in creativity,” Mrs. Kalambaheti said.

“It may start with a book—maybe a book about science experiments, or duct tape projects, or a work of fiction that really captured your imagination. The books are seeds, and the library is a place where you go to nurture and water those seeds and grow in curiosity.”

Nurturing those seeds comes naturally to Kalambaheti, although her path to this point didn't necessarily follow a straight line. “Growing up, I was not a bookworm,” she said. “I didn't read well, and I always needed help. I'd think to myself, ‘I enjoy books and reading, but I'm not on level.’ And there was such an emphasis on testing when I was growing up that it really took the joy out of reading.”

“I became a librarian, not because I was an avid reader. Everybody assumes that but really, I wanted to work hard to make experiences for kids of all interests and all levels. You don’t have to be one of the top ten readers in order to enjoy the library.”

Kalambaheti actually started her career as a first-grade teacher but noticed something at the Wisconsin elementary school where she taught. “The library was literally the center of the school. And the librarian there was doing amazing things. I just realized that was what I wanted to do—create different experiences and let the kids take them and grow.”

Kalambaheti went to graduate school in library studies and became involved with a program one doesn’t hear about every day. “I was a volunteer jail librarian,” she said. “A few other graduate students and I were in charge of collecting books, getting them organized, and going to the cells and switching them out.”

“The other thing we did with that program was get a grant to buy a bunch of picture books and Walkmans” (at this point Kalambaheti paused to laugh at how old she was before continuing), “and the people in jail who were parents could record their kids a bedtime story. We’d mail their children the book, recording, and Walkman, so the kids could hear their parents reading to them. It was so powerful, and I just kept thinking, ‘just because they’re in jail doesn’t mean they don’t want to be good parents. They still love their kids.’”

The program wound up winning the George H.W. Bush Points of Light Award, which honors individuals who demonstrate the transformative power of service, and who are driving significant and sustained impact through their everyday actions and words. Kalambaheti traveled to Washington D.C. to receive the award.

Next stop was Oceanside, California, near the Camp Pendleton military base. “There were a lot of young military families there who may not have been able to afford the museums in San Francisco or San Diego or L.A., so we created free Sunday morning programs like Kitchen Sink Science, or a deep dive into faraway countries. We wanted to show them that with books, you’re never limited by where you are.”

After her family’s move to North Carolina, Kalambaheti worked as a Middle School librarian, but really felt a pull towards Lower School students. “The Cannon School position is my dream job,” she said.

And our students often feel like they’re in a dream themselves when they walk into the library. One day, Mrs. Kalambaheti

will have them act out stories, complete with costume changes and props. (Not only is this exciting, it also helps children learn a valuable skill—story retelling). The next day will be a JrK and K yoga story time. On International Dot Day, there are lots of cooperative art projects tied to the book, “The Dot.”

It’s also common to find Kalambaheti dressed up like Cruella De Ville, Harry Potter...or even a pirate. Each September, in fact, she creates lessons for classes that revolve around “Talk like a Pirate Day,” (which she turns into a whole week), where students learn songs or participate in STEM challenges to create maps of buried treasure. There are also plenty of maker challenges, author studies, and creative projects like dioramas and parade floats throughout the year.

No matter what she’s doing, Mrs. Kalambaheti does it with a smile on her face. “I absolutely love what I do,” she said. “When I took the position, I was told to create a library program I’ve always dreamed about. And at Cannon, I can be the librarian I’d always dreamed about being.”

