

by JOAN RETSINAS

# NOT ANOTHER BOOKWORM

*How one professor went from education to advocacy*

Patricia Raub has taught American Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, the University of Rhode Island, Providence College and Rhode Island College. In her teaching, this Providence resident has always been interested in how, and why, ordinary people have questioned the status quo.

A North Carolina native, she grew up in Connecticut, graduated from Barnard College, taught English and history in junior and senior high schools, and then went to Bowling Green State University in Ohio for a PhD in American cultural studies.

Her goal was clear: to teach the American experience in a critical spirit.

How fitting that Professor Raub turned into the kind of activist that is so prominent in America's history. She is one of the many midwives of the nascent Providence Community Library system, a confederation of nine neighborhood libraries in Providence, formerly the branches of the Providence Public Library.

Raub's pathway from academic to activist was gradual.

She first got involved with the Providence Public Library as a patron. In 1987, when she and her husband moved to Providence, where both had teaching positions, they regularly went to the downtown Providence Public Library. That was "their" branch.

When the Providence Public Library trustees voted to shutter the elegant stairway and doorway on Washington Street in 2004, to open "the Empire Street branch" at street level on Empire Street, Raub joined a group of concerned patrons. The original entryway was a striking example of 19th century architecture. In fact, Raub had taught the history of Providence architecture in a course at Providence College. Why close this entryway?

More "whys" followed. Why did the Providence Public Library hold closed-door meetings, not open to the public, even though public money was going to the library? Why shutter the Washington Park branch? And, finally, why did the Library need to close five branches?

There were cogent economic arguments, but Raub felt compelled to keep pressing.

"I had never done anything like this before," she admits.

Instead of admitting defeat, Raub joined with fellow patrons in the Providence Library Reform Group to wade through reports, sit through meetings, and testify at hearings.

She assumed that eventually, the city, the trustees, and the donors would find some way to keep all the branches open, even if meant reducing hours.

But when that did not happen, Raub and her friends did not gracefully accept the inevitable.

They created a new library: the Providence Community Library.

"None of us saw this as our original goal," Raub concedes.

After all, there was truly no precedent for a city to lop off its branch libraries into a new entity. But today, all nine of the branches are serving patrons and Raub couldn't be more pleased.

"It is great to see all the libraries open, seeing all the computers being used and seeing staff helping patrons," she said. ■

