

By [Leslie Renken](#)

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In 1970, a Peoria housewife made it her quest to save the Lincoln Branch library

PEORIA — If it weren't for Kathleen Powers Ditewig, the Lincoln Branch of the Peoria Public Library might not exist today.

In 1970, the Peoria library board recommended closing the historic 1911 Carnegie library due to a budget deficit.

Horrified by the idea of losing the family's library — Kathleen was raising three children just a few blocks away on Shelley Street — the housewife sprang into action. A brief but bold campaign resulted in the recommendation being rescinded.

Though the campaign was an important part of Ditewig family history, Kathleen's youngest child, Kate Ditewig-Morris, was disconcerted to learn 45 years later that the incident was not recorded in library history.

"The story of her saving the library has been such a huge part of our family history," said Kate, a faculty member in the Department of Communications at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. "It's a story I've always wanted to tell to the community."

After her mother passed away late last year, Kate researched and authored a paper on the campaign. The information will formally become part of library history during a reception Tuesday celebrating Lincoln Branch's placement on the National Register of Historic Places. On Sept. 23 Kate will present her work to the Peoria Historical Society where it will be kept in a permanent record.

Our library!

"A quiet nonleader type South side housewife, who 'has never done anything like this before' has risen in protest over the Peoria Library Board's apparent intention to close Lincoln Branch Library."

— Journal Star article, Nov. 2, 1970

"The article Norm Bain wrote about her, the part about her being a nonleader type housewife, makes me cringe," said Kate. "But it was true. She was the June Cleaver of the day. She never considered herself a community leader, and she was terrified to do this, but she did it because she was passionate about it."

Like many women of her generation, Kathleen was not one to make waves. But the library was like a second home to the family — Kathleen was a voracious reader who passed the habit onto her children.

"We would go two or three times a week," said Kate. "When we were little, Mom would walk down with us, and when we got older we would walk down by ourselves. We did our homework there when we needed a place to spread out. It was just an extension of our home. I loved it there — I couldn't wait to go."

The day Kathleen learned of the planned closure the atmosphere in the Ditewig house turned stormy. Kate described the day in "A quiet, non-leader type': How Kathleen Powers Ditewig helped save the Lincoln Branch Library."

"Oct. 17, 1970 ... I wandered into the kitchen in search of breakfast but instead found my mother pacing the floor, enraged. She and my father were talking about an article in the Peoria Journal Star. 'They want to close the library!' she said. 'Our library!'"

The library board was formulating a plan to build a new Richwoods branch in the north part of town and begin reducing the number of branches around town. The Lincoln Branch, the library system's oldest building, was in a part of town that had begun to deteriorate.

"I was born in 1961, and it was still a predominantly working class neighborhood then, but there was starting to be some urban flight," said Kate. "I lived through some things in the 1960s, race problems in the streets, and it was starting to become a problem. I think the library board wanted to move out of it."

The reasons the board gave for the proposed closure were dropping circulation and increased crime.

Encouraged by her husband, William, Kathleen began researching the issues and recruiting other interested community members into the fight. She organized pickets outside the library. Boy Scouts and volunteers worked to raise awareness and collect signatures for a petition, which had more than 1,500 signatures on it by the November library board meeting.

Kathleen had never spoken at a public meeting before, so she spent a lot of time preparing for the event. She researched the issues of dropping circulation and crime for her rebuttal. A Journal Star article detailed her arguments:

"Mrs. Ditewig said she had checked the figures and determined that the largest decrease was in circulation of juvenile books, with an actual increase for young people and adults."

On the issue of crime: "Mrs. Ditewig said she had asked the police department for its records on the Lincoln Park Square and all that came up were two sex offenses, one purse snatching, three bicycles stolen and some rock incidents. That's all they came up within the past seven years." Kathleen and two others also



PHOTO/ LESLIE RENKEN/JOURNAL STAR

Kate Ditewig-Morris stands on the sidewalk in front of the Lincoln Branch Library where, as a child, she and her siblings participated in pickets against a proposal to close the library in 1970. Ditewig-Morris has written a history of that campaign, which was led by her mother, Kathleen Powers Ditewig.

testified that they are not afraid for themselves or their children while visiting the library.

The meeting ended on a positive note. Chairperson Hazel Wolf assured protesters that more research would be done before a decision was made.

"Mom came home both exhausted and exhilarated, and admittedly a bit proud of herself," wrote Kate.

After the meeting Kathleen launched a campaign to raise circulation by visiting area schools and encouraging teachers, students and parents to use the library. She even started checking out books to take to the schools, returning each week to pick them up and deliver more.

Kathleen's efforts were well publicized both in the newspaper and on the local TV stations. She was frequently interviewed with picketers parading behind her. She also called on local businesses for help.

"She persuaded Caterpillar Tractor Company (as it was known then) to print bookmarks reading "SOS — Save our Library" and windshield flyers: "Parents!! Looking for an exciting new world for you children? Teach them the joy of reading free books. Visit your Lincoln Branch Library soon," wrote Kate.

The campaign worked. At the December meeting a group of Bradley University faculty and spouses spoke against the proposed closure. In January the board granted Lincoln a temporary stay of execution. In April, when circulation numbers showed Lincoln Branch up 500 books from the previous year, it became clear that Lincoln would stay open.

Over the next few years the library board closed three small branches — Willcox, West Bluff and Prospect. Since then, the Lincoln, McClure and new Lakeview branches have been maintained along with the main Downtown branch.

In 2009 the Lincoln Branch library underwent a multi-million dollar renovation and expansion. A 12,000 square-foot building was added to the old Carnegie building, which was restored at the same time. In 2014 the library was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The best experience of my life

On a recent weekday morning Kate and her sister, Jeanne, visited the Lincoln Branch library. Though Kate had been there earlier this year while researching her mother's story, Jeanne hadn't visited in many years.

"It still smells the same," Jeanne said quietly, tears springing to her eyes. "This is where we used to sit — I think the children's section was right here."

After the Lincoln Branch was removed from the library board's chopping block, Kathleen went back to her primary job of being a mother. When her new friends from the campaign suggested she run for County Board, Kathleen declined.

"She wanted to return to her 'quiet life,' and so she did," Kate wrote.

Eventually Kathleen moved from the house on Shelly Street. Perhaps that's when she tossed all the paperwork, newspaper clippings, letters and photographs amassed during the fight to save the Lincoln Branch. When Kate began researching her mother's story, she had to look at microfilm of old newspaper articles to fill in the parts she and her siblings didn't remember.

For the rest of her life, Kathleen was exceedingly humble about her role in saving the library. When her children drove her past the newly renovated building a few years ago, Kathleen brushed off the idea that she was responsible for it still being there.

It wasn't until the final weeks of Kathleen's life that it became clear that she took pride in what she'd done. As Kathleen declined and her mind began to wander, she went back to that time, writing down memories on small sheets of paper and squirreling them away.

"She scrawled out memories of what had happened, and dates, and names of people she had talked to," said Kate. "None of them were coherent, but she rolled each one up and put it in a little cosmetic bag." Kate found the bag the day after her mother died, and soon after she found her mother's journals where she wrote about the campaign.

"She wrote 'next to my children, this was the best experience of my life,'" said Kate. "And that was it. I had to tell her story."

Leslie Renken can be reached at 686-3250 or lrenken@pjstar.com. Follow her on Twitter, @LeslieRenken, and subscribe to her on [Facebook.com/leslie.renken](https://www.facebook.com/leslie.renken).

If you go

* What: A reception to unveil the plaque recognizing the Lincoln Branch library's placement on the National Register of Historic Places, and to honor the memory of activist Kathleen Powers Ditetwig.

* When: 4:30 p.m. Tuesday.

* Where: The Lincoln Branch Library, 1312 W. Lincoln Ave., Peoria.

The event is free and open to the public.
