

Long Time LAWCHA Activist Undertakes Building a New Institution Devoted to Working Class History

Posted on December 15, 2014 by Peter Rachleff

A year and a half ago, I left Macalester College after a three decades-long career. I decided that it's time to devote myself more fully and directly to the kind of work I have educated many students to do.

Beth Cleary and I have organized "the East Side Freedom Library" as a 501c3 non-profit with a great board and a network of local allies. We signed a lease on an historic Carnegie Library on the East Side of Saint Paul and are working towards the creation of a Labor and Immigration History and Culture Center, full of books, visual art, material objects, and more, which we and others will use to create and implement structured programs for learners of all ages. We have some very special collections already — the locally developed Hmong Archives; Fred Ho's books and records; David Montgomery's personal library (thank you, Marty); Sal Salerno's collection of proletarian fiction and poetry; Paula Rabinowitz's collection of feminist literature and literary criticism; a collection of immigration history scholarship from Donna Gabaccia and Jeffrey Pilcher — and we expect more to come.

Please visit [our website](http://EastSideFreedomLibrary.org) (<http://EastSideFreedomLibrary.org>) and [our Facebook page](http://Facebook.com/EastSideFreedomLibrary) (<http://Facebook.com/EastSideFreedomLibrary>) to learn more about our work. You can also learn more about the project from [this half hour interview I did recently on SPNN, Saint Paul's public access network](#).

Beth and I have lived in this neighborhood for sixteen years, and we have come to recognize not only the challenges its residents face but also the great resources they have created over the years. For a century and a half this has been an immigrant working-class neighborhood. Now, among the descendants of Swedish, Norwegian, Irish, and German immigrants, new residents from Mexico, El Salvador, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Somalia, Burma/Myanmar, Bhutan, and midwestern cities like Detroit, Gary, and Chicago, are making their homes and creating their institutions.

This beautiful, iconic building is the only building in this neighborhood in which all of these residents, new as well as old, have felt welcomed. This building represents their shared relationship to this society. Now we have the opportunity to build on this foundation, to repurpose this building, to make it a place where “untold stories” are not only told but also shared across the boundaries which have separated communities from each other. The East Side Freedom Library can become a thriving cultural crossroads.

But this 98 year old building will require considerable resources to be restored, renovated, and preserved. We are in the process of replacing the roof, and we will soon need to replace the heating and cooling system. We created [this two minute video](#) to drive home this need.

We got a grant from the City for half the cost of replacing the roof, and we ran a successful crowdfunding campaign to make the required match. Nearly 300 local residents made donations, many of them honoring earlier residents, giving them a place “in history.” We won an Arts Challenge grant from the Knight Foundation, which will enable us to commission immigrant artists to paint a mural, make silkscreens in twelve languages, and build custom-designed tables for the reading room. We are beginning to receive support from local labor organizations. Of course, we have also been turned down for as many grants as we have received.

This project has great potential. It can empower people to produce new knowledge, to integrate that knowledge into their cultures, to interweave their cultures, to change their own community. This project has the potential to inspire others to undertake similar projects in their own communities. Please help us provide the space, the resources, and the context which can launch this work. **You can donate now at**

<http://EastSideFreedomLibrary.org>. If you prefer to donate in some other way (a check, gifts of stock, or other), please feel free to contact me or mail your donation to 835 East Sixth Street, Saint Paul, MN 55106. Whether you can help with a financial donation, a social media mention, or any other way, please know that we truly value your support as we begin this new journey.

Love and Solidarity,
Peter Rachleff
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Author



• Peter Rachleff

From 1982 to 2012, Peter Rachleff taught labor history at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 2014, with his partner Beth Cleary (who is also the source of the photographs accompanying this post), he co-founded the East Side Freedom Library (see <https://eastsidefreedomlibrary.org>).