

# Sunnysider Fights to Keep His 'People's Library' Going on Skillman Avenue



The Sunnyside Free People's Library located on the corner of Skillman Avenue and 43rd Street (Photo: Volker Detering)

July 9, 2020 By Asha MacKay

What started as a man giving away books on a street corner has turned into a tug-of-war over community use of public space in Sunnyside.

The Sunnyside Free People's Library, located on the corner of Skillman Avenue and 43rd street and in operation seven days a week, is a charitable exchange of books, media and ideas.

Seeing the complementary needs for public access to books and the lack of places to put excess during COVID-19, Volker Detering started a charitable community book exchange. Anyone can drop off unwanted books and take new-to-them tomes.

The book swap shares a corner with the Sunnyside Greenmarket on Saturdays, which has been supportive of the initiative. One vendor brought over a tarp when it unexpectedly rained one Saturday.

The volume of books being donated soon became too much for Detering and the handful of people helping him to store them. They have resorted to leaving the books outside indefinitely. Detering covers them with a tarp when it rains.

The People's Library has become a hub for conversation about books, politics, and the goings on about town. "This is a literacy corner, a free speech corner. It's not a political statement, and every political opinion is welcome and respected," Detering says.

"There are no rules except common sense," says Detering. "It's the people's. Nobody owns it," he adds.

Local representatives are in favor of the book swap. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY 14th district) gave kudos to Detering for addressing a community need when she visited the Greenmarket. Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer is another public supporter of the initiative.

Yet the concept of a low-maintenance charitable book exchange is lost on some. Last Sunday morning a Parks Department employee came to tell Detering to pack up the books because he did not have a permit. A neighbor had called 311 on the Free People's Library.

According to Detering, the Parks Dept. called on Van Bramer to make him disband the library. Van Bramer, for whom libraries have long been a key issue, reportedly said no.

The councilman declined to provide comment.

Detering says that the Parks Dept. does not seem to understand the charitable nature of the giveaway.

He said that an official told him that when no one is physically there to oversee the books the items are considered trash.

Therefore, he is required to move them elsewhere when he is not present. Detering says it is not physically possible. "Complying would mean an end to the program," he adds.

Detering, who continues to operate and is not backing down, also said having the books available for the public at all hours of the day and night provides a service.

"People want books, even at midnight or at four in the morning," he adds.

The Parks Dept. also expects Detering to take down the hand-crocheted rainbow attached to the park fence.

The artwork, by Sunnysider Kyle Bouchard, has become a point of pride in the community and is separate from the People's Library.

"Can you imagine if I had to be the one to go and take it down?" asks Detering. "People would not like that, they would be taking pictures and saying how terrible I was."

A spokesperson for the Parks Dept. said the agency is "looking into this matter" in terms of Detering's library and the artwork.

She also clarified that "While it's not illegal to exchange 'media' on our property, hanging materials on parks property without a permit is against our rules," referring to the rainbow artwork and Detering's Free People's Library sign.

With support from elected officials and the Sunnyside community at large, the Sunnyside Free People's Library is looking to stick around. "It's not something that can be stopped anymore," Detering said.

The Sunnyside Free People's Library is on Facebook as where book highlights and weather updates can be found.

[Sunnyside Swap](https://www.facebook.com/sunnysideswap)

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Unwanted books in good condition can be dropped off at any time.