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How 'Maplewood Ideas Festival' Took the Town by Storm in 2015

BY: CAROLYN MAYNARD-PARISI | April 24, 2015 | [0 COMMENTS](#)



Peter Eisenman, Maplewood Library Director Sarah Lester, and Richard Meier (credit Joy Yagid)

In March, the second annual [Maplewood Ideas Festival](http://villagegreennj.com/arts/maplewood-ideas-festival-features-acclaimed-authors-artists-visionaries/) (<http://villagegreennj.com/arts/maplewood-ideas-festival-features-acclaimed-authors-artists-visionaries/>), hosted by Maplewood Memorial Library, took the town by

storm. If locals were not aware of this event in its inaugural event, they certainly knew about it by the end of its second run, as the Ideas Festival inserted itself into the middle of a hot button town issue ([the development of the former Maplewood Post Office \(http://villagegreennj.com/towns/maplewood/op-ed-famed-architects-insights-worth-consideration/\)](http://villagegreennj.com/towns/maplewood/op-ed-famed-architects-insights-worth-consideration/)) and attracted celebrities among its audience members (can you say “[Meryl Streep is in the house](http://villagegreennj.com/arts/famed-costume-designer-ann-roth-brings-maplewood-ideas-festival-close/)”? (<http://villagegreennj.com/arts/famed-costume-designer-ann-roth-brings-maplewood-ideas-festival-close/>)).

We recently caught up with Library Director Sarah Lester to get her thoughts on the second go-round and find out about ideas for the 3rd annual festival.

Village Green: How did you get the idea for the initial Maplewood Ideas Festival? Were you inspired by other similar events?

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Sarah Lester: Maplewood is such an incredible town filled with talented interesting people. Working at the Library we get to interact with many of these people. The Maplewood Ideas Festival is our way of showcasing this talent. The idea is modeled after the annual New Yorker Festival, but unlike the New Yorker Festival and like all of our library programs, all Ideas Festival events are free and open to the public.

The highlight of the festival is the annual Maplewood Literary Award. Last year we were thrilled that Judith Viorst, class of CHS '48, accepted our invitation and she wowed us all with her warmth, intellect, humor and grace. This year it was an honor to give Paul Auster, class of CHS '65, the 2015 Award.

VG: What was the main goal of the festival, what did you hope to achieve? Did you achieve those goals?

SL: The main goals are to celebrate the creativity and talent in our towns, and to provide the community with opportunities to come together for civic engagement. This year we had the added attraction of celebrating NJ Makers Day and launched our CreateSpace at the Hilton Branch Library. This was a terrific event highlighting our fabulous STEM programming. Given the feedback we've received, I believe we may have even exceeded our goals!

VG: How did you attract such a high caliber of guest speakers? Any good stories about particular speakers and how you managed to sign them on?

SL: We realized last year that we needed one prominent person to say yes. In 2014, that person was Judith Viorst. I had wanted to ask Judith Viorst to come back to the Library since I started working here in 2012. I finally wrote her a letter and was so pleased when she enthusiastically agreed to come. We live in a talented community and I am so lucky to work with an equally talented staff at the

Maplewood Library. Through staff connections, we created a great lineup in 2014 and were able to build on the success of last year's series when planning for this year.

When our committee of library staff met in late spring to discuss the 2015 award we unanimously chose Paul Auster, but none of us knew him, or had any connections to him. After procrastinating for a very long time, I finally sent a letter through his agent. Fifteen minutes later, Kathy Goldfine, who sits in the office next to mine, called into my office and told me that Paul Auster was on the phone. In our age of texting and email this was totally surreal. On the other end of the line was the Paul Auster, not the character Paul Auster or an anagram of Auster, but the amazing storyteller and man who has been called one of the greatest writers of our time. I was honestly shocked to hear him say yes.

With Auster on board, we got up the courage to reach out to the world-renowned architects Peter Eisenman, CHS '50, and Richard Meier, CHS '52. In one of our early meetings about the Ideas Festival, Senior Librarian Amanda Eigen mentioned that she had grown up in the same apartment building as Peter Eisenman. Another library staff member, Robyn Whalen, had just visited Richard Meier's model museum in Jersey City and suggested we reach out to him. In September, Amanda wrote to Peter Eisenman and I wrote to Richard Meier (paper letters, sent through the U.S. Mail) and we heard back soon after that they would be delighted to share the stage and have a discussion during our Festival. With Auster, Eisenman and Meier on board, we put together a terrific program including the CEO of the National Urban League, Marc Morial and Academy Award winning costume designer, Ann Roth.

VG: What was the overall estimated total attendance? What events were most popular? How many more attendees did you have than the first year?

SL: Over 1,300 people attended our Ideas Festival programs. The Meier and Eisenman conversation alone attracted a crowd of 440 at Columbia High School. All of the events were popular, well attended, and attracted diverse audiences. Attendance more than doubled this year.

VG: What kind of feedback did you and the other library staff receive about the event? Care to share any comments from attendees or others?

SL: We've received many wonderful comments this year. By celebrating the talent and creativity in our town, we also celebrated the Library and the vital role it plays in our community.

- *“What a thrill to launch our Love and Arguments in your so special program/library for an engaged audience – infinite and hearty thanks. You're the best! Onward,” Marylou & Jerome Bongiorno*
- *“Great festival! Thank you library people! Fantastic finale! Thank you Sarah, Hannah & Ann!” Alison Golder*

- *“Thank you to Sarah for running an amazing festival...” Hannah Sorkin*
- *The Ideas Festival presenters “... each in their own way represented creativity, awareness of the world around them, and presented us with the challenge to do the very best in our areas of pursuit. (They) had a message for each of us.” Kathleen P. Galop*

VG: What was your favorite, standout moment of the festival?

SL: There are too many! What I loved about all of the events was to see how meaningful they were to our presenters. I also loved seeing the power of friendship and support so prominently displayed. Meier and Eisenman relished their time together. Marc Morial acknowledged two members of his board of directors (his children) in the audience. The actor Angelina Pietropinto came out in support of Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno, the film editor Tim Squyres came out for Paul Auster, and of course, Meryl Streep came out for her good friend, Ann Roth.

VG: What plans have you made for next year’s Ideas Festival?

SL: We have plans for another fantastic Festival in 2016! In upcoming years, we’ll keep putting into action one of the goals of our Strategic Plan; to strengthen the role of the Library as a cultural and intellectual center in Maplewood, and to uphold the tradition of our Mission Statement: to build community and enrich the quality of life throughout Maplewood by bringing together diverse people, information and... ideas!



Meryl Streep and Ann Roth at Maplewood Ideas Festival. Credit Joy Yagid