As I close in on the end of my first year as the director of the Albertson Memorial Library, a few special things come to mind. Local public libraries truly are a centerpiece of our communities. They are a hub, no matter how big or small. Yes, in our libraries, we go to seek information, to find a book in which we can lose ourselves, or to discover a new hobby. But they are also where we gather, where we share in each other’s joy, and where we come together to support each other. In Albany, this is no different.

As the director of our small library, I saw that firsthand at our annual Snack with Santa event on December 2nd. This was not my first Santa event at our library. I’ve planned – or volunteered – at all of them over the past seven years, but 2023 was by far the best. But was it really the best? Or did it seem that way because I saw how much the Albany community came together to see that our youngest community members – our future patrons and volunteers – had the best possible Christmas experience? Sixteen high school students put in almost 40 hours of community service setting up and decorating our Christmas tree, assisting children with craft-making, serving snacks and hot chocolate, and passing out treat bags to children in attendance. Several community members purchased and baked treats, and others made themselves available to greet families and assist children in choosing a special holiday book to take home. Members of the Albany Fire Department generously paraded Santa around town on a truck before dropping him off at the library. And then there were the members of our Albany Lions Club who graciously offered to fund this amazing event.

As I meandered around the library, greeting each child and family member, I couldn’t help but feel joy. But I also felt pride – pride in my community for coming together to do what is right. To watch those high school students helping our littlest ones make reindeer out of candy canes and pipe cleaners or glue red strips of paper onto a white candy cane-shaped piece of paper brought a sense of happiness and respect. To hear them tell me at the end of the event how much they are going to miss these opportunities next year after they’ve gone off to college reminded me how much they, too, treasure their community. These kids have learned the true meaning of volunteering – of giving back.

Volunteering our time and talents is who we are as human beings. It gives us a chance to give back to others in our communities who have helped shape us. The next time you feel a need for joy, pride, and self-worth, just volunteer a little of your time and talents for those who have helped shape who you are. Come to the library. I promise that there is a place for you!