

Wednesday, May 1, 2024

## Mayor's Newton Update



### **Newton Free Library, Art Exhibits and the Library Bill of Rights**

*Please see the following message from me as well as one from our Library Director, Jill Mercurio, on art exhibits at the Newton Free Library.*

As one of the busiest libraries in Massachusetts, the Newton Free Library is a City treasure and a hub of activity and ideas. Our library supports the [Library Bill of Rights](#) and its principles of open access and diverse points of view reflected in collections, displays, programming and services.

The Newton Free Library has offered New England artists exhibition space for decades. Twice a year an independent committee of art professors and professionals who live or work in Newton selects works to be displayed during the following year in the library. They encourage artists from a variety of ethnicities and life experiences to apply.

Importantly, the selection of an artist and the artist's work by the Committee does not imply an endorsement of the artist's point of view.

Tomorrow, Thursday, May 2, a photography exhibit by artist Skip Schiel that was selected in July 2023 will open for one month in the Newton Free Library Gallery. His exhibit displays photographs taken during 2018 and 2019 of people and landscapes in the West Bank.

When told of this exhibit by Library Director Jill Mercurio, I immediately had deep concerns. I knew that the subject matter and title would be offensive to some residents, especially at this time with conflict in the Middle East and rising antisemitism at home. The title, *The Ongoing & Relentless Nakba: The Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948 to Today*, for example, will be considered by some as not just one-sided and offensive, but wrong and reprehensible. In addition, this exhibit is troubling in that it occurs during the month of May which is Jewish American Heritage Month, and a month that includes Yom Shoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day and Yom Ha'atzmaut – Israel Independence Day.

I believe this exhibit will be quite hurtful and divisive.

As your Mayor, however, I respect and uphold the Library's principles which are embedded in the Library Bill of Rights, including:

- Having materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues
- Resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas
- Not excluding materials because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation
- Making exhibit spaces available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use

Guided by these principles, I support Library Director Jill Mercurio to allow this exhibit to move forward in accordance with our Library's role in Newton of providing intellectual freedom and freedom of speech. We do not censor. Additionally, this exhibit is also in accordance with the Library's past practices, guidelines for exhibits, and the independent Committee's selection.

I applaud the efforts by the Newton Free Library to be a role model for how a community library can help residents learn about deeply painful and contentious topics. Rather than canceling or postponing this art show, the Library is helping us learn, engage, think critically and converse civilly.

The Library is working to have resources on this complex and emotional issue from a wide range of perspectives for visitors. This includes a program where together the speakers explore their varied and different perspectives, and talks by artists with diverse views. In addition, an art exhibit of daily postcards created by Zeev Engelmayer in the days following October 7 which offers a different perspective will be exhibited simultaneously starting on Friday, May 3.

In this polarized world where people feel unsafe, unheard, disrespected, unseen, and hated, our Library will keep striving to be a neutral place for us to have difficult conversations. We understand that we may continue to disagree but know we will still be a community of neighbors who care for each other.

I believe in open access for expression at Newton's library.

I know that the Library Director and the Board of Library Trustees will take a fresh look at policies and procedures regarding art exhibits.

I am committed to having a safe and comfortable environment for visitors and employees at our Library and unimpeded use of the Library and its resources.

I agree that people have the right to voice opposition and exercise their free speech in a peaceful manner.

I will work with our community to build bridges between us rather than to sow division.

I will keep leading on stopping hate.

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

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*The following is a message from Newton Free Library Director Jill Mercurio:*

### **A Message to Patrons Regarding May 2024 Exhibits and Programming**

As one of the busiest public libraries in Massachusetts, Newton Free Library provides an extensive collection of over 548,000 physical items and offers an active calendar of free events to help educate, enrich, and connect our community.

We are an open and free public library. We are guided by the American Library Association's [Library Bill of Rights](#) and its principles, including:

- Having materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues
- Resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas
- Not excluding materials because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation
- Making exhibit spaces available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.

In any given month, more than 200 exhibits, programs and displays are happening within the building. This includes art exhibits. The Library has offered artists exhibition space for decades. Twice a year an independent committee of art professors and professionals, who live or work in Newton, selects works to be displayed monthly over the course of the following year at the Library. Selections are made based on the Library's philosophy of providing open access to information and ideas and of presenting diverse points of view.

On Wednesday, May 1, a photography exhibit by artist Skip Schiel was installed for a month. The artist and his photos were selected in July 2023 and are titled *The Ongoing & Relentless Nakba: The Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948 to Today*. Schiel's exhibit displays photographs taken during 2018 and 2019 of people and landscapes in the West Bank.

On Thursday, May 2, an exhibit of drawings by artist Zeev Engelmayer entitled *Postcards* will be installed, containing a sampling of the colorful drawings the artist created each day since October 7 from his home in Tel Aviv.

The selection of an artist for exhibition does not constitute an endorsement by the Library of the content of the program or the views expressed by the exhibitor; however, we know some will find these exhibits objectionable and hurtful.

Our Library has always stood for the principles of free expression and free speech. Newton's Board of Library Trustees and I strongly believe in the importance of providing access to multiple viewpoints on complicated and contentious topics. As with other materials in the library, people will have varied reactions and will form their own opinions.

Now more than ever, the Library is committed to helping visitors learn more about nuanced, complicated, and controversial topics.

With the continued goal of presenting access to varied points of view, we are compiling resource lists for readers. We are inviting speakers from different perspectives to come together for conversations about the history and events that are shaping our world today. We are also actively working to prepare programming on the use of art to interpret events and express oneself, and ways to listen, talk, engage, and learn respectfully about divisive issues.

We are deeply committed to ensuring that visitors and staff have safe, unimpeded access to the library.

I ask the Newton community to help us serve as a model for respectful and peaceful exploration of ideas and information.

Newton Free Library Director Jill Mercurio

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