Sno-Isle Jonalyn Woolf-Ivory, executive director of Sno-Isle Libraries, will retire in December after more than 30 years with the library district.

Sno-Isle Libraries executive director retiring after 33 years

Jonalyn Woolf-Ivory spent the past 16 years overseeing major growth and expansion.

By Kari Bray
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MARYSVILLE — Jonalyn Woolf-Ivory’s family grew up in Sno-Isle Libraries.

She started working for the library district when her daughter was a year old, and she later had twin boys.

Now, Woolf-Ivory has two school-age grandchildren and a grown son on each coast. When she walks into some of the libraries she’s helped plan and run, people ask how her kids and grandkids are doing.

“That’s a luxury,” she said. “I don’t take that for granted.”

After 33 years with Sno-Isle, the last 16 as executive director, Woolf-Ivory is retiring. She’ll stay through November.
Sno-Isle has 23 libraries in Snohomish and Island counties and the district serves about 750,000 people. It is funded almost entirely by property taxes, with an operating budget of more than $50 million.

The Board of Trustees has started the search for a new director. The goal is to select finalists by the end of the summer, spokesman Jim Hills said. The district is offering a salary “negotiable from $170,000,” according to the job posting.

Woolf-Ivory, 64, started as building manager for the Marysville Library in 1985, her first job with Sno-Isle. She’d previously taught English in Japan and worked for a few years at Mid-Columbia Libraries in the Tri-Cities.

She soon became an assistant director, then deputy director. She took over as executive director in 2002.

When she started, she never could have predicted the changes that would come with the rise of the internet, computers and digital materials, she said. She remembers when only a couple of libraries had reference books, such as thick collections of state laws. If someone in Darrington wanted to research property law, a librarian would call the Lynnwood Library and ask that pages be scanned and mailed. Then fax machines made it faster. Now, someone at the Darrington Library can access the information online.

Technology has “allowed us to provide materials to the district equitably,” Woolf-Ivory said.

She grew up in rural Whatcom County. Her parents would drive her to the Bellingham Library when she needed more than what was onboard the bookmobile that visited the area.

“I can’t imagine living in a community, whether it’s a rural community like where I grew up or in suburbia, without having a public library,” she said.

Woolf-Ivory studied political science at Washington State University, then library science at the University of Washington. She never dreamed she would work any one place for three decades, she said.

She started at Sno-Isle when the district had 186 employees. There are about 500 now. She recalls when weekend and evening hours were limited. Now, most of the libraries have weekday evening hours and are open Sunday as well as Saturday.

Having just finished an election to increase the district’s levy, Woolf-Ivory said she hopes people keep supporting libraries.

She also urges libraries to continue adapting as needs change. They play a crucial role in bridging the divide between those who have access to technology and information, and those who do not, she said.

“I think about our country and our democracy, and public libraries seem so

quintessential to that basic value of what it’s like to live in the United States,” she said.

Woolf-Ivory has worked with communities on building new libraries. She was involved in a dozen such projects, including in Monroe, Snohomish, Freeland and Coupeville.

In recent years, she also has supported the addition of demonstration libraries — precursors to permanent locations — in south Everett, Smokey Point and on Camano Island. The Camano Island Library has since found a permanent home.

A few months ago, Woolf-Ivory stopped by the new Mariner Library in south Everett. Preschool storytime had just started, so she slipped in to observe. The kids were high-energy and playful and the librarian engaging, she said.

As one little boy left the room with his mom, she heard him ask, “Do we get to come back tomorrow for another story?”

“It’s pretty hard to beat that,” Woolf-Ivory said.

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