

Programs and Pen Pals

You Never Know Your Library's Reach

SHARON VERBETEN

This is a story of a pandemic, a program, and the pen pal that followed. In short, you never know your library's reach—who will see or hear about your programs.

This a true story of a fortuitous long-distance friendship—one spawned out of a pandemic pivot that has reaped great rewards.

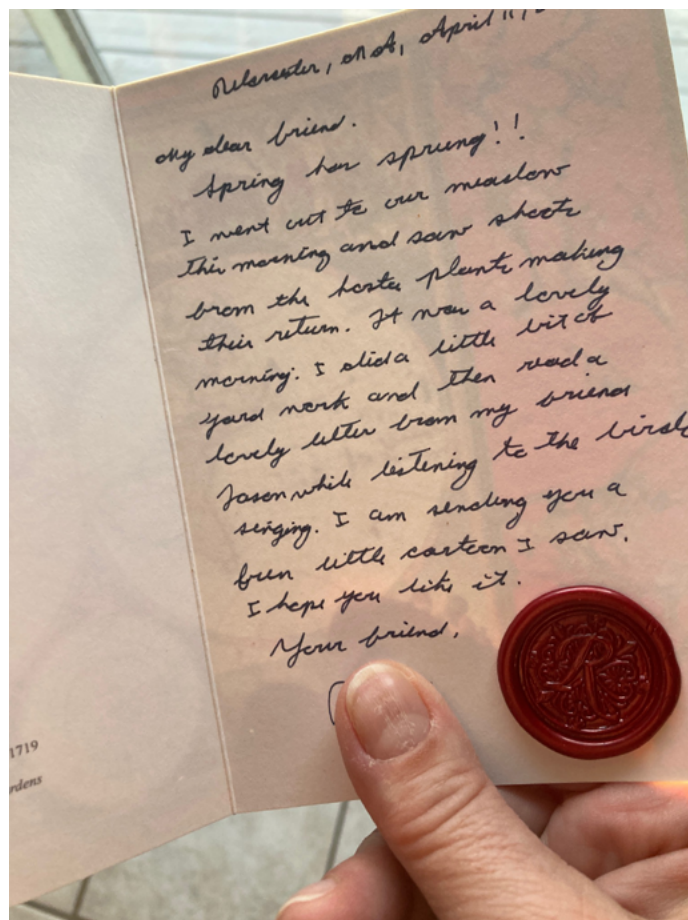
In 2020, when, as we all know, libraries had to reinvent methods to reach our patrons, I recorded a video about the lost art of letter writing. It's a topic I've always been interested in—I had an international pen pal when I was younger—but was more so during lockdown.

I was passionate about putting pen to paper, letting emotions slowly take form in cursive loops. It didn't matter whether the medium was lined school paper, fancy linen notecards or postcards—the pandemic was the perfect time to resurrect this form of communication.

Ironically, it was a video missive, posted on YouTube, that sparked a far-away viewer to do just that—and write me a letter.

Thousands of Miles by Mail

YouTube can be the Wild West of videos, and it can be challenging to find exactly what you want. And when you're a librarian posting during the pandemic, you wonder if your video has gone into Internet ether.



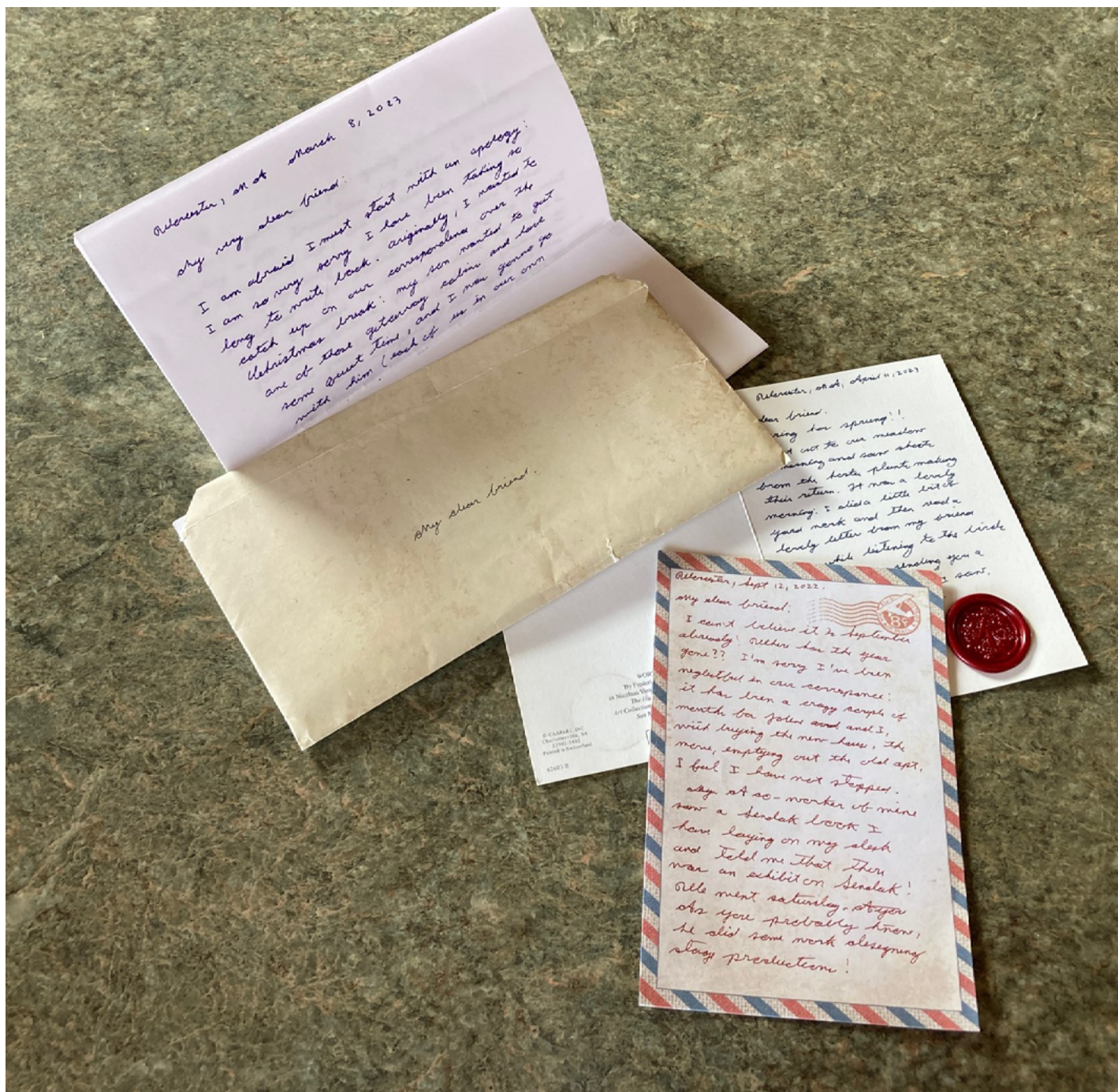
Somehow, a man on the East Coast—whom I'll call Roman to preserve his privacy—saw my video and wrote me a letter, which he addressed to my library. He thanked me for posting that important message about the importance of the written word, something he shared so much that he decided to let me know.

I responded in kind, surprised that my video taped in Wisconsin had had such a far reach.

We continued to correspond by snail mail—and our correspondence and long-distance friendship has lasted for four years now. He's shared stories about his family and about what books he's currently reading; I've shared about my hobbies—when I told him



Sharon Verbeten is Youth Services Manager at the Manitowoc (WI) Public Library; this is her twenty-first year as editor of *Children and Libraries*.



I collected vintage Valentines, my next letter included a few! I've sent him thrifted treasures as well.

While we now follow each other on Instagram, we've never asked for phone numbers or emails—the charm of this correspondence is in the small things. His sometimes-indecipherable handwriting. The way he addresses the letters to “Sharon Verbeten, archivist” (which I am not!). The way he starts his letters with, “My dear friend” and seals them with a wax “R” stamp.

In this age of technology, social media, texts, and emojis, I'm always thrilled to find a new letter from Roman in my mailbox.

And despite our busy lives, we do try to send letters every few months.

My even bigger thrill is that my little library video did what I had hoped—inspire at least one person to revive this sadly old-fashioned method of communication. I just didn't think it would have come from someone nearly one-thousand miles away. &

Editor's note: While I had hoped to share my video with you, dear readers, I have been unable to locate it online—into the internet ether, I suppose.