

## Northeast Kingdom Fund

When the Albany General Store burned six years ago, the community lost its place of gathering to catch up over coffee. Patronage at the Albany Public Library, which is housed next door in back of the Town Hall, also dwindled after the fire. The buildings once bookended a strong sense of community for the 1000+ geographically divided residents on an otherwise empty main street where cars clock 50 miles per hour through town and most services are 20 miles away.

Librarian Kristin Urie realized the town couldn't wait any longer for the rebuilding of the general store to bring people back. The library needed to take the lead in cultivating more community connection, knowing that rural families with young children often feel more isolated, especially in the winter. She began championing a grassroots effort to reinstate a place of gathering. "We're a services desert," says Kristin. "You either have to go to Newport or Morrisville, even for mental health services. It makes it even more important that we have a strong community fabric and that there's a place where families can come and share stories or reach out to each other for help or advice."

In 2018, the Albany Public Library received a grant from the Northeast Kingdom Fund to hire a skilled facilitator to oversee the new Winter Play Space stocked with balls, mats, toys, and books, creating a fun, warm, and safe place for families to play all winter. It drew regulars from as far north as Irasburg. "It's just as important for the kids to socialize with each other as it is for the adults. I think it saves a lot of us from going into a deep dark depression," says Facilitator Gillian Boutin. The successful program led to other community gatherings like Zumba, yoga, and free soup events, and brought more people into the library to check out books.

"The library is coming to life in a new way. It feels like it has a life of its own. The time is right for the community to reclaim the library and reclaim it as a community space," says Kristin as the library's open flag flaps outside like a strong, steady heartbeat. Now with the library in full swing and the general store being rebuilt, the town will soon have its bookends back.

Since its inception, the NEK Fund has granted almost \$450,000 to organizations in the region.

