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Aurora Free Public Library
ATTN: Board of Trustees
370 Main Street
Aurora NY 13026

Greetings folks!

I am writing this letter in an attempt to solicit your support with an idea some of us have generated over the past few months... to not only honor one of Aurora's old legends, but to bring healing to his family who gave so much to the community over a lifetime. Yes, I'm a Gunderson, born and raised on Cherry Avenue, until I married in 1981 and relocated. I'm a retired elementary educator, widowed and currently living with my daughter and her family in Tennessee. However, we are always in touch with the good folks back home and keep abreast of the many happenings around the old stomping grounds. Please bear with me, and let me explain my intention for this correspondence.

The quaint little village of Aurora prides itself on several things, among them being that it has always fostered a deep sense of community and despite a plethora of changes over the past several decades, its people continue to strive to preserve its rich history. Perhaps this is why so many have stayed and some of us who left always long for a chance to come back. That being said, then I think it is crucial that honoring that history includes recognizing its unsung heroes. Like so many of you, I grew up in Aurora and the truth is that as we all grow older, we embrace its unique history, and we should rightfully grasp opportunities to celebrate its unsung heroes of the past, before those of us who still remember have come and gone.

Ray Cromwell was one of those people. It goes without saying that those who knew him will indeed never forget him...**an ordinary man of extraordinary gifts that touched the community over a lifetime, in countless ways**. I understand that many residents both past and present have been memorialized that carry the surnames of prestige and wealth and their contributions. That's as it should be, yet... isn't it equally important to honor a citizen like this incredibly kind and humble man that selflessly gave so much to so many in his own quiet ways? The connections between its citizens are the very core, the heart and the soul of Aurora. Always has been and always will be. When we look at Ray's life's journey, the examples of his

humanity and compassion made him a rare bird indeed. There are many of you have lived here your entire life, as did your families, and some of you have returned to this magical place we call home, and can remember this prince of a man. Legends like Ray Cromwell are an integral part of Aurora's past and part of what makes Aurora and its people so special. **It's time for his story to be told. His voice was soft but his character was rock solid.**

Later in his life, Ray Cromwell opened his heart and his home (this would be back around 1965 I believe) to a young local foster child who had endured great sadness and abuse, miraculously changing that boy's life forever. Ray, once again, just as he had done for his own family... sacrificed his own dreams, wants and needs for the betterment of another, never putting himself first, and all without regret. He was a brilliant man who was headed for a stellar career in engineering but gave it up when his family needed him to return home from Shaw University in NC to care for his mother and sister. Ray was also a highly gifted baseball catcher and over the years the story has been passed on that he could have been a major leaguer if the times had been different. Most people would look at these lost opportunities with bitterness, but not Ray. Family and friends were his only priority. Ray was a single man, never married and without children of his own. **Yet, he took in Art Radcliffe, a 15-year-old boy, and raised him as his own son and was recognized as a model foster home in the state of New York by Nelson Rockefeller.** Understand... Ray never extended himself for any other reason other than he saw a boy who needed a chance, just like he had earlier in his life for his family who needed him close to home, or anytime there was a neighbor or friend who needed a helping hand. Yes, he was an African American man who raised an orphaned white boy as his own during an unsteady time for civil rights in that era...however... Ray never made anything about racial issues. For him, the relationships he built and decisions he made were solely about the decency in people caring for one another with humanity and compassion and he remained forever humble to his core. It's quite extraordinary, yet he never once solicited accolades or recognition, that always came from those who knew, loved and respected him for decades. Ray worked for Wells College his entire life and was always there to help anyone around the campus or village and usually did any outside work in the community for free.

Years later, when Art married his high school sweetheart, Sharon Nevue, the love of his life, in 1975, Ray embraced not only Sharon, but her entire family as well. In fact, he left his home to Sharon's mother when he passed many years later. His quiet nature, unwavering kindness and whimsical sense of humor made him a natural magnet for kids. So, it came as no surprise, that when Art and Sharon had two children of their own, Davie and Shannon, they were everything to him. Art and Sharon stayed in Aurora, where Art worked for the village of Aurora for twenty years and continued to work locally, until he passed away after a heartbreaking battle with early onset Alzheimer's at the young age of 63 in 2015. Ray had raised Art to be a kind and generous

man, a good husband and father, and a citizen loved by many. It goes without saying that he was beyond proud of the man his son had become.

Ray's granddaughter, Shannon, was very close to her grandfather. Shannon was a beautiful, multi-talented and tender soul who tragically took her own life this past October. Sadly, a long-time dream of Shannon's was to gather the history of her beloved grandfather, whom she adored, and present his story somehow to the town with hopes that they could memorialize his life and honor him as one of the selfless unsung heroes of Aurora's history. Sadly, with her passing, she never lived to see that transpire. My hopes are that today you can fulfill that dream.

Sharon Radcliffe has been my lifelong friend since high school and has endured more heartache than anyone should have to weather. She has lost her husband, her father-in law, her son, and now her beloved daughter. In the spirit of all that is right and decent, we are offering a request for the town, in particular the library.... to listen, learn and turn so much tragedy into something wonderful and celebrate a life whose amazing long overdue story that needs to be acknowledged.

With that being said, let me share some thoughts a few of us have generated in regards to the possibilities for creating a meaningful way to honor Ray's memory. For those of us who can still remember, we know that Ray Cromwell lived a simple life and would never want a big fuss or any sort of ostentatious recognition. Despite, his selfless contributions he never wanted the spotlight on him. However...**if you asked anyone who knew Ray, they would be quick to share his endless passion for books...a lifelong avid reader to say the least. He was also a gentle man who adored children and thought the greatest gift one could give a child was to instill a love for the written word.** Contributions that come from the heart are just as important as monetary ones.

So today, there are several of us, both former and current residents, who are reaching out to the library in hopes you would be open to tendering the possibility of honoring his memory with a reading incentive that would inspire a love of literacy for underserved children or struggling young readers in the community, and open the doors to the world of wonders books can bring on a whole new level. As I said, Ray Cromwell was a man who gave without taking or needing any form of recognition, validation or accolades. However....at this moment in time, we feel we need to preserve his legend in a way that not only captures who he was, but in a manner in which he would approve of and that would make him smile.

At present, we are simply brainstorming **possibilities for consideration**. Here's some "food for thought" about perhaps **what that might look like**.

First... we envision designing **a simple plaque that featured his silhouette and called it "A Ray of Hope." (**which adequately describes him to a tea throughout every stage of his life).

Our tentative thoughts were that perhaps it could be **displayed somewhere in the children's section of the Aurora Free Public Library**. For me and so many of us, this is where our own insatiable love for reading all began. Aurora's little library is such a special place. As a retired elementary school teacher myself, I know all too well that fundamental literacy skills are critical for all children and ones that each child deserves opportunities to build upon. **When children are immersed in literature it opens so many doors**. A good book can show children characters who face hard problems and find a way through A good book can show them how courage and kindness can change the world. The possibilities are endless.

Research also shows that **shared readings** give children both comfort and confidence. I can picture ia **weekly afterschool program** time set aside where volunteers ("reading buddies" so to speak) in the community could be recruited to commit to **just one hour a week on a designated day (ex. say a Tuesday from 4:00 – 5:00) to simply give an hour of their time to share a good book and rich conversations with a child...making those powerful connections**. The only prerequisite for volunteering would be **a willingness to foster a love for reading**. You could set this up by semester where you commit to a set number of spaces that you could reasonably accommodate (say anywhere from 1 to a max of 12 kids). Local educators and retirees and even high schoolers in the community are always great resources. Their job would simply be to read and share books with kids and feed their imaginations (of course..along with a tasty afterschool snack) and inspire.

I was heavily involved in a similar program when I taught back in North Carolina and the impact it had was powerful. This could also present a wonderful opportunity to invite local elementary kids who are struggling with reading in school to participate. Your local educators could help recommend and encourage those children to participate or it could simply be parents in the community who feel their child could benefit. **What could be better than to see a nurturing neighborhood environment celebrating literacy**.

In addition, several of us would be more than glad to work behind the scenes to solicit new and gently used books for all kids who participate from local businesses, or publishing companies. **At the end of each session not only could a child check out a book from the library but we could begin to build a little "Book Store" somewhere in a corner of the children's section perhaps..where each child who participates could go home with the GIFT of a book of their own (their choice) each week to begin to build their own personal libraries**. The bottom line here is: Reading teaches children how to learn and understand more about themselves and the rest of the world around them in so many ways and it's FREE.

I know Ray would love the idea of creating opportunities for children to embrace the joy and power of reading. How about this for a title?

A RAY of hope.... Fostering hope though children's literature

To see Aurora hold true to its claims, we humbly present this piece of history for serious consideration. We know budgets in these trying times are tight and would do whatever was needed to raise the necessary funds/materials to make this happen. I could even make trips back to Aurora, if need be. **A story like Ray's doesn't just bring a smile to young and old, it offers one of hope, healing and a restored faith in humanity. Individuals like Ray are the glue that holds a town together. They believe it in, they fight for it, and we need to fight for the memories of who they were and all they gave to endure. Respectfully hoping you will reach into your hearts and give this proposal careful consideration so that we might all work together to make this happen. It's the right thing to do!**

Respectfully,

Gail Donovan

Gail (Gunderson) Donovan

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Please also note here that our aunt, Maralee Gunderson, has shared that a former SCCS teacher, **Mr. Pete O'Connell, has research on the incredible life story of Ray and his family that could be housed for patrons to discover who he was and all that he gave to the community.** He adored children, and family was everything to him...his immediately family, his adopted family and his village. We would love to be able to share the rest of his story with you which exemplifies how one man's magnanimous generosity extended well beyond the sweet man we all knew as our friend. (We will forward this documentation once we are in receipt) Wouldn't it be wonderful to have this documentation housed in the library to share his story to many?