



*A Celebration to Benefit the  
New Haven Free Public Library*

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2026

*Hosted by* **nhfpl** FOUNDATION

NEW HAVEN FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY

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**Seedlings  
Foundation**

FOSTERING AN EDUCATED AND ENGAGED CITIZENSHIP

# Mardi Gras

## Library Champions

### *Claire Criscuolo*

*In acknowledgement of her dedication to nourishing our community as a nurse, author, and small business owner*



### *Shamain McAllister*

*In acknowledgement of her leadership in promoting literacy and advancing community connections citywide*

# Mardi Gras

**nhfpl** FOUNDATION  
NEW HAVEN FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY

## ~Schedule of Events~

**5:30 PM**

Cocktail Hour  
50/50 raffle

**6:15 PM**

Welcome Remarks  
Joseph Ramos, New Haven Jack & Jill, Inc.  
Ruben Ortiz, Broken Umbrella

*Dr. Mary Ellen Savage, President  
New Haven Free Public Library Foundation Board of Directors*

*Honorable Justin Elicker  
Mayor, City of New Haven*

*Maria Bernhey  
City Librarian and Director  
New Haven Free Public Library*

### **Honoring**

#### **Library Champion Award**

*Presented To: Claire  
Introduced by: Erik Clemons*

#### **Library Champion Award**

*Presented To: Shamain McAllister  
Introduced by: IfeMichelle Gardin*

Paddle Raise

**6:45 PM**

Dinner

**7:15 PM**

50/50 Draw  
Music and Dancing

**8 - 8:30 PM**

Final Dance and Goodbye

# Welcome to Mardi Gras

at the

## New Haven Free Public Library

Dear Friends,

It is with great excitement that I welcome you to this special evening at the New Haven Free Public Library where we transform our Ives Main Library into “The Big Easy” at our annual Mardi Gras event. Tonight, we not only gather as a community to celebrate the steadfast service of our public library and our Library Champion honorees, but we also recognize the generosity of supporters like you and your continued commitment to enriching the lives of our city through literacy, learning, and human connection.

The New Haven Free Public Library stands as a vital civic space bringing people together and serves as a bridge to learning, resources, and support that promote discovery, personal growth, and well-being. Rooted in education, the library welcomes every community member, offering safe and inclusive spaces for exploration, expression, and connection – strengthening a shared sense of belonging. Through a wide range of free programs and services, the library connects residents across neighborhoods to one another and to essential resources, building lasting relationships across New Haven.

As you take part in our festivities this evening, I invite you to reflect on what the Library means to you- perhaps the impact of your first library card, your first visit to a NHFPL location, or the role the library plays in your daily life. Consider how those moments are shaped by a space that values free thought, expression, and access for all. At a time when such values cannot be taken for granted, our library remains firmly committed to belonging at its core.

Our gathering reflects a shared commitment to preserving a cornerstone public institution dedicated to barrier free access to information and materials. Looking ahead, we remain focused on ensuring our libraries continue to serve as welcoming spaces that evolve to meet the needs of our community. With your continued support, we can advance this mission and connect with even more neighbors across our city.

To our cherished donors and sponsors, I extend heartfelt thanks for your generous contributions to the New Haven Free Public Library Foundation. Your support is not just an investment in books and programs; it is an investment in the future of our library.

Thank you for being an important part of our library family. Enjoy this special evening and know that your generosity is making a lasting difference.

Warm regards,



Maria Bernhey  
City Librarian and Director  
New Haven Free Public Library

# Honoring Claire Criscuolo Library Champion Award for



Claire Criscuolo graduated from the University of Bridgeport and is a registered nurse. Her love of wholesome foods, along with her desire to spend more time with her (late) husband, Frank, and create exciting, healthful, home-cooked meals lead them to the restaurant business only months after graduating from college. Armed with the recipes she culled from a family of marvelous Italian cooks (Claire's Mom maintained a presence at her daughter's restaurant well into her 80's) she and her husband Frank founded Claire's Corner Copia on September 17, 1975. Now, in its fiftieth year, this vegetarian restaurant continues to thrive at its original location across from Yale University and the historic Green in New Haven Connecticut.

Over the years Claire's Corner Copia has received numerous, glowing reviews published both locally and nationally, including a review by Patricia Brooks for the New York Times. This popular restaurant continues to win awards including: Best Vegetarian Restaurant, Best Desserts, Best Soups, and Best Quiche. Claire's Corner Copia is listed as one of only two restaurants in New Haven "Not to be missed" in the Yankee Magazine Guide to Travel in New England, and the Michelin Green Guide to New England. MSNBC listed Claire's Corner Copia as one of the heart-healthiest restaurants in the country. The Lithuanian Coffee Cake at Claire's Corner Copia was listed in Connecticut Magazine as the 50 things to eat before you die.

Claire has received many awards of the years including, but not limited to, the Cy Flander's Award, Restaurateur of The Year, and The Honorary Degree Of Doctor Of Humane Letters. She is the author of five cookbooks and had her recipes published in hundreds of newspapers across the country. Claire is a member of the Catholic Charity League, and The Connecticut Restaurant Association, and she has served on the board of directors for The New Haven Project for Battered Women and was a member of the by invitation only, Les Dames d' Escoffier, where she was a board member and co-chaired (with Betty Fussell) the Contemporary Issues Committee.

In celebration of our upcoming 50th anniversary, our goal is to help fund a gift to the city and establish Kindness Closets, resource closets for children, and teenagers where they can pick groceries, books, games, and hygiene products. The long time hashtag at Claire's Corner Copia has been kinder than necessary, and has now become a 501(c)(3). This new organization will create kindness closets, in libraries and faith based organizations . It will be a closet where children can go to choose groceries, hygiene products, books, games, and other things that children need to thrive . We have sold our Logo charity merchandise, and our cookbooks, and have partnered with campus customs, who will also donate the proceeds of our charity merchandise to help fund this new project. #BeKinderThanNecessary

# Honoring

## Shamain (Sha) McAllister

### Library Champion Award for



Shamain McAllister is a nonprofit leader, cultural strategist, and community engagement advocate based in New Haven, Connecticut. She is the Director of Arts, Culture, & Tourism for the City of New Haven. In her previous role she served as the Associate Director of Education & Community Impact at the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, where she led community-driven programs, curated citywide educational initiatives, and managed a departmental budget in support of accessible and inclusive cultural programming.

Her work spans the intersection of arts, equity, and community empowerment. She served as a Community Navigator for the City of New Haven's Vision 2034 Comprehensive Plan and was a Co-Creation Team Member for Connecticut's first Cultural Equity Plan. She has also held key roles with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra and Kulturally LIT.

McAllister brings a strong background in strategic planning, project management, and long-term relationship building. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Management and Criminal Justice from Albertus Magnus College and is a graduate of the University of Connecticut's Emerging Leaders of Color Nonprofit Leadership Program. She also serves as Vice Chair of the Arts Council of Greater New Haven and is a board member of Best Video Film & Cultural Center. Shamain is a proud member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc.



I always refer to libraries as the true equalizing institution in America!  
Everyone has access!

The library in our hometown, Hagaman Library was the place My Brother, Billy and I headed toward pretty much every day after school. We couldn't afford an encyclopedia at home and the library gave us access to all the resources we needed for our studies.

So, yes, I'm a big fan of public libraries. Free, public libraries.♥♥

Today, libraries have expanded the resources they offer, beyond books, to include computer access, a place to find community and shelter, and to learn about all the things we need to succeed.

Thank you, to everyone who makes our libraries the place for everyone.

- Claire Criscuolo

What the New Haven Free Public Library means and has meant to me as an institution for literacy, learning, safety and community is that I cannot imagine life without the library. The library has always been a safe haven. To escape into a book, to revel in the quiet when the world was too loud or serve as a catalyst to dream and build a life that no one would believe. There was a time when it was illegal for my people to read. The library serves as a pillar to consume knowledge freely for all people. And because of that communities are strengthened. People come together to fellowship at the library, young people hang out there after school, toddlers experience their first story times or folks may take a class to learn a new skill. Knowledge gaining beyond reading happens at our libraries in New Haven. There is the memory lab, the tinker labs, various crafts and learning groups. So much is there to ensure a better livelihood for all. Thank you each librarian and staff member who take up the charge each day to change the world.

- Shamain McAllister

*Mardi  
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Transportation, Traffic and Parking*

*Hon. Mayor Justin Elicker, City of New Haven*



I've been a member of the New Haven library system since 1983. I've been using the resources of the library since then. After my son was born, a trip to the Ives Main branch was the highlight of the week for us. We always left with a stack of books that he couldn't wait to read as soon as we got home. Some became favorites which we took out again & again until we finally bought them. Once he was in college, I went back to his elementary school to give back, reading to the Pre-K3-4 children. I told them about my trips to the library with my son & how much he loved it. I encouraged them to ask their parents to take them to their local branch so they could also experience the wonder of a children's library. My most memorable moment was when one of the kindergarten children came running up to me, saying that he had his very own library card, pulling it out of his little wallet. He was so proud of himself & I felt proud myself, knowing I had an impact on this child & gave him a gift that just keeps giving: reading!

-Evelyn Rauscher  
Mitchell Branch

Growing up in New Haven, I have several core library memories during my childhood. In elementary school I remember accompanying my mother to the Ives Main Library local history room while she researched her dissertation. In high school I would walk through Beecher park and pass the Mitchell Branch Library on my way home from school after getting off the CT transit "B" bus at the corner of Whalley Avenue and Blake street. I also remember going to the Ives Main Library to find books for my required summer reading list and discovered authors and works such as James McBride's *The Color of Water*. These memories remind me of the great comfort I have felt in knowing that there is a public library system that exists to support the community.

-Luis Chavez-Brumell  
Deputy Director



# COMCAST NBCUNIVERSAL

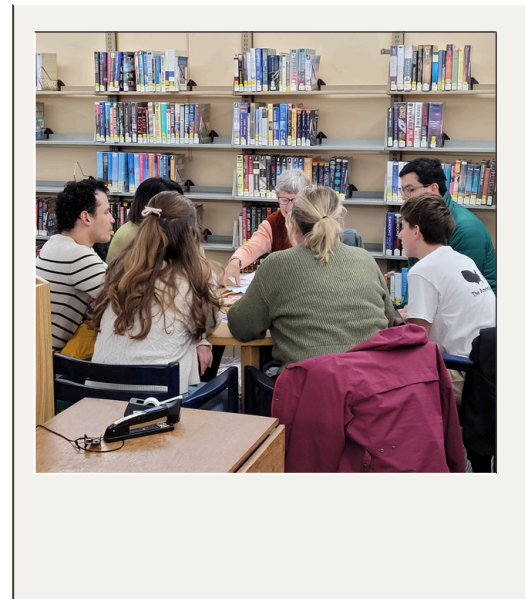
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Library and Foundation!**

My husband and I married in 2016 and agreed we wanted to buy a home in New Haven. We both had busy jobs, and I had a 70-mile commute. On top of this, I was in grad school! An assignment for my favorite professor was to learn everything we could about a community... Census trends, neighborhood issues and accomplishments, kids' needs, and more. I needed to speak with an expert and chose to use this assignment to learn about our future city. I wrote Sharon Lovett-Graff, Branch Manager of the Mitchell Library, and asked if I could interview her. She agreed. We spent over an hour talking about everything in the neighborhood: Artwalk, Edgewood Park, Lotta Studio, traffic (!), on and on. At the end, Sharon asked why I chose New Haven. I told her we wanted to buy a house here, and this seemed like a good way to learn what was going on. She said "Oh, my next door neighbor just listed her house! You should take a look at it." Well, we've now lived next door to Sharon for almost a decade, and I couldn't ask for a more welcoming and helpful neighbor!

-Meg Friedman

I grew up in the Hill and used to always come to the library growing up. I came here when I was in High School and now that I have finished college and moved back home, I come to the library to do my work. Now I work remote from home and sometimes I want to get out of the house to get my work done here. I can stay here all day and work with no interruption.

-Demetry (27)



I can do my job hunt on the computer, and they help me find the right places to look for jobs and helped me with my resume.

-Anonymous

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*and its enduring commitment to  
literacy and opportunity*



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Creating a vibrant downtown through Yale's community investment program

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Creating career opportunities for New Haven residents

**Yale** *Office of New Haven Affairs*

[onha.yale.edu](http://onha.yale.edu)



I come here with my brother and cousin when my mother is working it's the only place she'll let us go on Saturday. She said it keeps us out of the streets. She checks to see if we're here. The people are nice, and the security guard watches over us like a Library Mom.

-Chris (9)

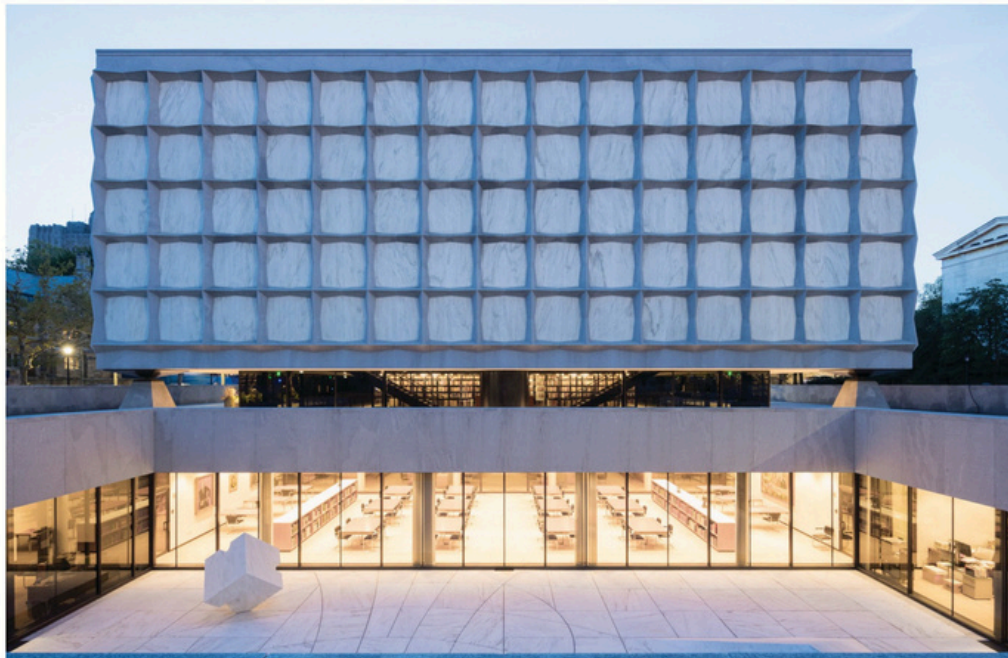
I like coming here with my brother and they let us use the computers for games. The security guard always makes sure we're safe.

-Carter (10)

Everyone is always nice to us and let us use the computers and give us some books like comic books and graphic novels to read about super heroes. The security guard checks on us.

-Abel (12) Chris & Carter's cousin





[beinecke.library.yale.edu](http://beinecke.library.yale.edu)



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Happy *Mardi Gras!*

[schwarzman.yale.edu](http://schwarzman.yale.edu)

The Yale School of Art wishes New Haven a

# HAPPY MARDI GRAS!

We are delighted to be a part of this vibrant community.

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[ParkNewHaven.com](http://ParkNewHaven.com)

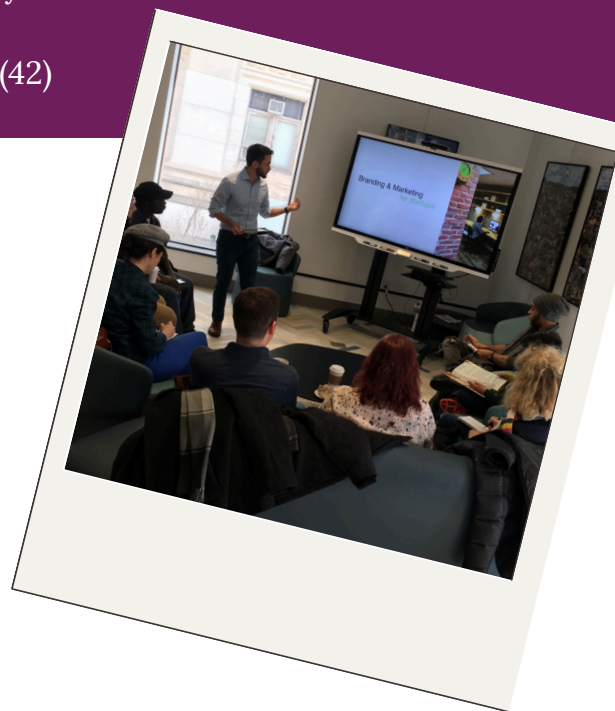


They let us come in and stay out of the cold. I read the paper and use the computer, and they help me log on. They have a food pantry and sometimes I can get some clothes.

-Ann

My home Library is Fair Haven. I have always like to go for the books. It is also a second office for me I work virtually and the time at the library on the computer helps me get my work done. The library staff is always helpful and nice to me and my kids. It is a safe place for me and my children to be inactivity together to learn and play.

- Gia M. (42)



I love the Fair Haven Library and sometimes I go to the downtown library, but I like the Fair Haven library because it's smaller. I mostly come to stay in out of the cold because I am unhoused. I like to come and read the paper to get the latest news and the library staff are kind and helpful. I feel safe inside and stay warm.

-Victor (49)

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When I grew up I remember going to the original Stetson library on the corner of Dixwell Ave. and Thompson St. I always loved going because books took me around the world. I loved being in the huge room with all the books on the shelves was comforting to me. I was always an avid reader, loved to do book reports and talk about the stories.

When the Stetson moved down to Dixwell Plaza I lived in the apartments behind the plaza and we would go the library to get out of the house in the rain. I always loved filling up my library card and used to collect all the filled ones.

The library shaped my LITerary journey and my passion for books that lead to creating Kulturelly LIT and the LITFest

-IfeMichelle

I'm homeless and I need a safe place to come in out of the cold and they let us use the bathroom for 10 minutes to wash up. I feels safe and I', not judged here.

-Tony





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# Good energy moves us all

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My grandchildren LOVE to go to the library! They are immediately energized as they walk through the main doors and up the stairs to the huge second floor children's section of the Ives Library or the bright and comfortable first floor children's section of the Stetson Library. Ives is very close to their home and Stetson is located in the neighborhood where their Granddad grew up (Ashmun St. and also Northwest Drive), so it is important to us for them to attend some of the library events in the area where his family once lived. The librarian is right there to greet them as they walk in to a space for children to explore books (sometimes their parents signing out more than 20 books at a time!), computers and other activities. Puppets and puppeteers, dinosaurs, stuffed animals, games, and children reading and interacting with new friends and play dates with old and hearing different languages spoken are all some of the awesome sensory joys in a space that has been thoughtfully crafted by our children librarians. There is even a quite large display of baking pans at Ives to check out with your library card! My 15 month old granddaughter visited the Ives children's section of the library for the first time in January and it was so fun to watch her discover the play area, point up to the colorful flags above the shelves of books, walk down the aisles and pull a book, try to climb and sit at the youth tables, play with the blocks and dinosaurs, look out the big picture window, but most of all her social interaction with some of the other children.

Librarians vast knowledge of books, newspapers, historical information, authors and newly published periodicals makes them a great resource for their parents to speak to in person about any topics and for parents and children to easily navigate and delve into the rows and rows of carefully arranged shelves (by librarians I might add) to find children books to read at home or at the library, like board books, chapter books, graphic novels, interactive and rhyme books to name just a few that will spark their interest and imagination, take them on an adventure and give them endless BookJOY.

Librarians brainstorm ideas and bring them to fruition, coordinating fun events that my grandkids have attended/participated - coding and other STEM classes, story time, 1000 books before 5(1 of my grandchildren completed!) reptile visits, author visits, art exhibits and activities, video games, lego building, music, and cultural and community history activities. Some are in-house, some bring our talented, diverse, multi-lingual community to the library. There are many more activities they have not signed up for yet, like for example the piano lessons being offered at Stetson. The librarians at Stetson even arranged an evening for the community to meet an Olympic gold medal winner!

How AWESOME is that! A librarian's presence is also a safe, friendly and welcoming face in an environment where members of the community who have children can have their children meet and engage with other children in the space together as well as for parents to meet other parents or to just sit and be still for a moment which sometimes is so needed. It can also be a third space for children who need a place to get away from an event(s) that is causing them much sadness. In conclusion, libraries and the librarians who work there, have brought JOY to my grandchildren in a wonderfully curated and fun community space where they and their parents and siblings can freely explore books and other amazing events and activities, it introduces them to their learning to read journey, and enhances their imagination!! I am so very thankful and grateful for libraries and librarians.

-Kevin, Isla, Zoë and Jrue's Nana

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February 17, 2026.**



**Dr. Ceasar and Tracy Irby**



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Our Mom brought us here since we were young and we always have used the library for schoolwork and homework. Now that I am in college I can get some of the books I need for school and my sister can work on her school project. We also have done community service at the library to help translate Spanish and read stories to young kids with the Spanish story books. We like coming here because it's peaceful and quiet.

- Sisters Aylin (18) & Keilli (16)

I come here to get the latest books and ask the librarians for information for recommendations. I can read all the books that I cannot afford to buy because I like to stay up on the latest authors. I really like how I can get one on one help when I need to use the computer so its not so difficult for me to use. I'm going to join the book club so I can talk about some of the books and I go to the crocheting club so I can meet new people and talk together. I love coming here because I'm retired and it gives me a reason to get out of the house.

-Jill (54)



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**HAPPY MARDI GRAS!**

The Community Services Administration Team



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Department of  
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CITY OF NEW HAVEN  
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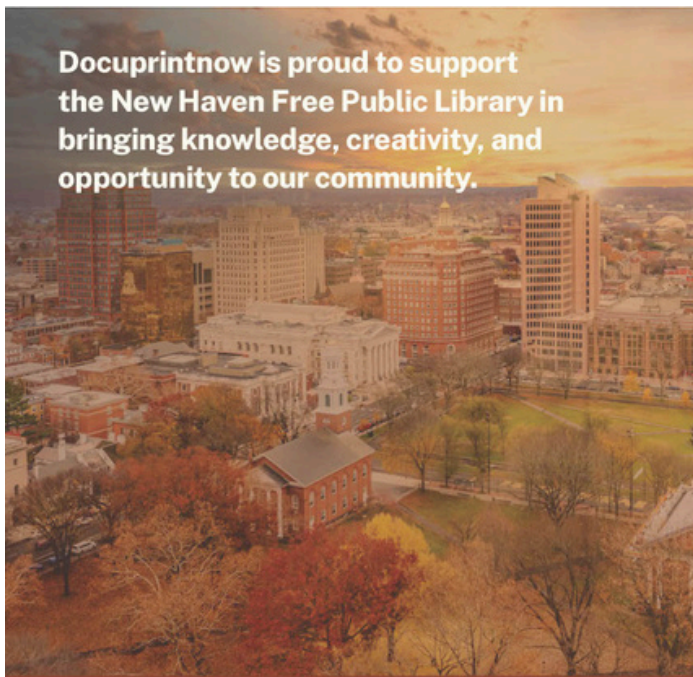


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# Mardi Gras

is a night of joy, celebration, and fun but it is also a night of fundraising for and uplifting the

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*City Librarian and Director*

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# *Mardi Gras*

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*Patricia Brett, Ed.D.*

*Elsie Chapman*

*Giulia Gambale*

*Thomas Geoffino*

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at the New Haven Free  
Public Library*