

# Story time for all



Hour photo / Erik Trautmann

Vicki Oatis, director of Children's Library Services and Innovator of Family Programs at the Norwalk Public Library, heads Tunes and Tales Thursday, a children's story time. Story times are popular lately, coinciding with a national trend.

## Norwalk Library's story time the place to be for many in city

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 HOUR STAFF WRITER

**NORWALK** — On a rainy morning last week, 20 preschool-age children and their parents and guardians crowded into the children's activity room at Norwalk Public Library to participate in one of the library's wildly popular preschool story time programs.

On this particular Tuesday, owls were the theme du jour: the young families gathered around to hear children's librarian Evelyn Cunningham read "Little Owl's Orange Scarf" and "Little Owl Lost".

At these programs, stories are followed by activities with shakers or bells, playtime and bubbles.

"We always end with bubbles," said Vicki Oatis, the library's di-

rector of children's services. "It's a big thing."

According to Oatis, the library's story time programs for preschoolers have seen a marked surge in popularity over the last five years. The increase corresponds with what appears to be a national trend; libraries and bookstores from New York to Minneapolis have reported that their preschool story hours are overflowing.

"You can see where (the numbers) go up," Oatis said, indicating a spreadsheet she has used since 2010 to track attendance at the events. Three years ago, preschool story times were averaging 32 attendees, counting parents and children; presently that number hovers around 43, which is enough to pack the relatively small activity room wall-to-wall. Oatis and Cunningham said they are regularly forced to turn

people away for lack of space.

"We're really proud of (these programs)," Oatis told The Hour. "I think we're doing a great service."

Oatis thinks the appeal of story time goes beyond simple entertainment: parents who are themselves learning English have reported that story time expands their children's vocabularies, for example, while parents have a chance to bond.

"It's a great built-in support network for the parents who come in," said Oatis, who met one of her own closest friends bringing her children to story time.

"We know of a lot of friendships that have started here," added Cunningham.

Norwalkers Eli Martinez and Janet Villalobos attended Tuesday's story time with triplets Amber, Astrid and Leo, 5, and

one-year-old Alisa. The family said they have been coming two or three times a week for the past year.

"It's cool for the kids. They learn," Martinez told The Hour.

Xinia Cespedes said she and Sophie Chan, 5, attend about once a week.

"I can't remember which book I like," said Chan, adding that she has enjoyed all the stories equally.

Library Director Christine Bradley expressed pleasure that these humble children's programs — which Oatis said have existed in some form as long as the library itself — are finally getting their due.

"Who knew? The preschool story hour, long a standard of public library service, is at last recognized for the literacy loving it imparts to our youngest patrons," Bradley said.