



Irvin L. Young
Memorial Library

Irvin L. Young Memorial Library
431 W. Center St.
Whitewater, WI 53190

The honorable X
Address

Date

Dear X,

Joy Harjo, a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and former U.S. Poet Laureate, wrote the following about the southern United States, “When I lived there recently, we were not there, we were written out of the story and appeared only in place names.” That sentiment resonated with my experience of living in Whitewater, a place that named itself after a Potawatomi word but has otherwise displaced its original Indigenous inhabitants and written them out of the story. Greetings, my name is Jaime Weigel and I serve on Irvin L. Young Memorial Library’s (ILYML) Board of Trustees, located in Whitewater, Wisconsin. For the past year, I have been working with librarian Sarah French on what we hope will be the first step in rectifying that wrong. We, on behalf of ILYML and its Board of Trustees, have created a land acknowledgment statement and action plan as an expression of our gratitude to those whose ancestral homelands the library now sits and as a call to action to build a better, more equitable library for all that we serve. Today, we write to you seeking your knowledge, guidance, and feedback on these documents so that they may eventually be published and shared with the public, with your permission, to educate our patrons and the greater Whitewater community.

In ILYML’s strategic plan, we vow our commitment to the following values: safe and welcoming, trust, diversity, fun, lifelong learning and creativity, making connections, and service excellence. As such, the Board of Trustees voted unanimously in December 2021 to initiate the process of creating a land acknowledgment statement to better understand the history of the land on which the library resides and to recognize the people whose ancestors lived here before us. Specifically, we aim to publicly acknowledge, honor, and appreciate the ancestral homelands of the Potawatomi and Ho-Chunk Nations and commit to being better land stewards by working to build active partnerships with our Indigenous neighbors and

their communities. Additionally, as an institution committed to lifelong learning, our goal is to acknowledge and teach others about the truthful, complex history of this area and hope that our actions inspire other libraries and governmental bodies in southern Wisconsin to do the same.

Understanding the importance and enormity of this work, we embarked on a year-long process of educating ourselves about the history of the land, the Indigenous people who live(d) here, and land acknowledgment statements themselves. Specifically, we viewed a webinar produced by Spooner Memorial Library and Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe College Extension titled “[Supporting & Representing Indigenous People in the Library](#).” In April 2022, representatives of the library, including the Director and Board President, met with Dr. Kenny Yarbrough, Chief Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Officer at UW-Whitewater to learn from the university’s experience in developing a land acknowledgment statement. Additionally, we sought guidance from Bridges, our library system, toured and learned about the Whitewater Effigy Mounds Preserve with a local historian, visited the Whitewater Historical Society and Hoard museums, and read countless books and articles to learn more about the history, culture, and sovereignty of Wisconsin’s First Nation peoples.

Furthermore, we recognize that acknowledgment is an important first step, but it, alone, is not enough. We know that it must also be accompanied by a commitment to act. In addition to a land acknowledgment statement, we have created a plan of tangible action steps, aligned with our strategic plan, to help us better understand and serve Indigenous communities. In the past year, we have completed the following action steps:

- Conducted an audit of the library’s collection, specifically its books published between 2018 and the present; we are proud to report that the library has a strong and representative collection of Indigenous authors for readers of all ages.
- Hosted a presentation at the library to educate the public about local [Native American Effigy Mounds](#), led by local historian Kori Oberle, which resulted in bringing much-needed attention and, ultimately, a commitment for funding from the city to help maintain and preserve this sacred site.
- Created a display case in the lobby in honor of Native American Heritage Month, shared a book list of Indigenous authors with library patrons, and promoted the “[Big Library Read](#)” of [A Snake Falls to Earth by Darcie Little Badger](#).
- Developing a dedicated space on the library’s website with adult and youth book lists of Indigenous authors and other digital resources about Wisconsin’s native peoples, including the

full land acknowledgment statement.

Attached to this letter you will find the draft of our land acknowledgment statement and action plan. We realize that this is a living document, thus, we are seeking your input and feedback so that it may be amended and improved as needed. For example, in the statement, we recognize that the library sits on the ancestral lands of the Potawatomi, Ojibwa, Odawa, and Ho-Chunk peoples. Do you feel this is accurate? Are there any other tribal nations that should be mentioned specifically? We also understand the historical practice and ongoing atrocity of white colonizers writing and controlling the narrative, deciding whose history gets told and whose gets left out. In full recognition of this, we would like to ask the following questions: What do you prefer to be called? How do you tell the story of this land and your people? How would you like to acknowledge this history? Do you have a local name for the place now referred to as Whitewater? Do you have any additional feedback for us or changes you would like made to the wording or the document itself? Are there other questions we should be asking that we are not?

In closing, I'd like to leave you with a quote by Faith Spotted Eagle, an activist and member of the Yankton Sioux Nation. She said, "When we talk about these losses and these traumas it is not to impart a sense of guilt. It is to impart a sense of freedom from denial. The Native people's objective is to heal. The non-native people's objective is to come out of denial." For too long, non-native people in the Whitewater community have been in denial about the truthful history of this area. As an organization dedicated to educating the community, we recognize this is only the first step in coming out of that denial. We hope this will be the beginning of much-needed dialogue and partnership between Irvin L. Young Memorial Library and Wisconsin's Indigenous people so that we may better serve and support you. We also hope that our work today, and in the future, sets an example for others to follow and inspires them to take action in support of Indigenous communities.

Sincerely,