

Hazelwood Resident Recognized Nationally for Volunteerism

Lisa Merenda receives First Bank CRA Community First Award honor for sixth year in a row.

By [Helena Hewlett](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 5, 2011



Lisa Merenda (on right) at the St. Louis book fair, where she has dedicated hours and hours of her personal time.

When she's not preparing taxes for [First Bank](#) here in Hazelwood, Lisa Merenda is more than likely devoting her time to [St. Louis' annual book fair](#), which will mark its 62nd year this April.

As a certified public accountant for [First Bank](#), Merenda has been with the branch for about 20 years, and was recently honored with a First Bank CRA (Community Reinvestment Act) Community First Award.

Merenda, along with 46 other individuals in the nation, was honored for giving back to the community and "taking it a step farther with their spirit of giving," said VP and Corporate CRA Officer for First Bank, Susan Montoya.

Montoya said that Merenda not only reached the "gold level" for the award, which requires that the employee volunteer at least 100 hours of service to CRA-qualified organizations, but surpassed any and all expectations. CRA-qualified activities typically support one of the following criteria for low-to-moderate income individuals: affordable housing, community services, economic development, and revitalization.

"Lisa contributed more than 200 hours of hard work in just a year, and that's on top of her regular job," Montoya said. "This is definitely something to be recognized."

Montoya said Merenda was awarded with a certificate of achievement, and a \$300 check for the charity of her choice.

During 2010, Merenda spent early mornings, late nights, and weekends helping out with preparations for St. Louis' annual book fair, which raises money for literacy and education. Both of these causes are near and dear to her heart, Merenda said.

A big chunk of the proceeds from the book fair go to The Nursery Foundation of St. Louis, while the remaining funds go to various grants and scholarships, she said. And volunteers make sure that none of the donations go to waste. Books that are damaged are recycled so that they are not sent to landfills, and any extra stock that remains after the sales are over are donated to places such as prisons and food pantries.

[The Nursery Foundation of St. Louis](#) is a day care and preschool setting for children in the St. Louis area, dedicated to serving families who would typically be unable to afford these types of services. Merenda loves this preschool for so many reasons, but among them are some of the historical aspects that cause this institution to stand out among others of its kind. The school, for instance, was the first interracial school in St. Louis, Merenda said.

She also has a deep appreciation for the efforts the school takes to provide quality education for all of their students, whether or not their families are low or moderate income. Merenda said that the school's tuition is based on a sliding scale. When awarded a \$300 check for the charity of her choice, Merenda, without having to think twice, chose the Nursery Foundation. Merenda's passion for education is tied in with her enthusiasm for books.

"I've been doing the book fair for 20 years," she said. "It's just so fun, I can't stay away from it."

She has a special eye for the historical books and other unique donations that come in. Sometimes, Merenda admits that she feels a little bit like a detective. If, for instance, a book that holds historical significance in another area of the nation has found its way all the way to St. Louis, Merenda takes pride in tracking down a location where the book will be appreciated.

In addition, Merenda takes pride in returning cash, letters, and other items she finds in book donations on occasion as well. "Often, people will put items like cash or envelopes between the pages of a book for safe-keeping and forget about it. If we find anything like this in a book, we are diligent about tracking down the original owner of the book, so we are able to return it," she said.

Since Merenda started volunteering with the book fair, First Bank has become one of the sponsors of the fair. She approached a branch manager and asked if it might be possible. Before she knew it,

Merenda's request was granted. In addition, First Bank's employees regularly volunteer to help at the book fair each year. Who better to trust at the cash register than trained bank tellers?

Merenda said she was honored to receive the Volunteer Spirit Award this year; but this isn't anything new to her. In fact, this is the sixth year in a row that she has been recognized for her achievement. Merenda admitted that initially she didn't even keep track of her hours.

"I wasn't even aware that it was important to keep track of our volunteer hours, this was just something I loved doing," she said.