

A Perfect Partnership— Libraries and Literacy Providers

By Dale Lipschultz, Literacy Officer, Office for Literacy and Outreach Services,
American Library Association

When I was a little girl we lived in a true Chicago neighborhood. I clearly remember my earliest library visits. Our public library was a storefront with books displayed in the window. I remember choosing picture books and storybooks about horses, dogs, and kids like me. Soon, our Chicago neighborhood gave way to a more contemporary way of life. My family moved from urban Chicago to Park Forest, a very new suburb considerably south of Chicago.

The 1950's were halcyon days for suburbia and Park Forest was no exception. The community had a shopping center, a swimming pool, and a library. In 1954, the Park Forest Public Library consisted of a single room in the Village Hall. But location and size didn't matter to me. Inside the library the world around me faded away. I scanned the stacks for just the right book. I loved Nancy Drew mysteries, the *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, and biographies detailing the remarkable, albeit tragic, lives of famous women. (I especially loved Clara Barton and Amelia Earhart.) I'm still amazed that a childhood love of reading led to a lifetime of literacy and libraries.

In our society, libraries are both the symbol of stability and the embodiment of change. I'll give you a few examples, but first it's important to understand what the public library is all about. Public libraries have an important mission: to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all. As in years past, libraries offer a quiet space, a fine collection of books



and other materials for patrons of all ages and readers of all abilities, and programs and services on every topic from architecture to zoology. To this day, the public library is the cornerstone of the community.

In this decade of changes and challenges, libraries and librarians have to be nimble and creative in order to enhance learning and assure equal access to information. Perhaps the best example of change and challenge is technology. It's not an overstatement to say that technology and the Internet have changed the world and our expectations. We all expect news and information on-demand and in real time, immediate answers to questions, and high speed access to the broadest possible array of information. It's reassuring to know that all of this is available at your library. In 2004, the Gates Foundation reported that 95% of public libraries in the United States offer free access to computers and the Internet.

In addition, most libraries offer basic computer and Internet skills training. (www.gatesfoundation.org)

In addition to providing a global reach, libraries must maintain a local touch. Public libraries are mandated to serve library users in their communities. This mandate brings its own set of challenges. As in past generations, immigrants continue to come to America in search of a better life, a brighter future, and a freer world. I want to offer a few examples of how communities and their public libraries are meeting the demands and needs of New Americans.

Let's begin in Queens, one of New York City's five boroughs. In Queens, there's a library on almost every corner. Each library is dedicated to serving the needs of its own unique and diverse population. In fact, Queens prides itself on being the most diverse county in the United States and they have the numbers to prove it. According to the most recent census data the main branch of the Queens Borough Public Library serves 75,629 people over the age of 5. Eighty-one percent (81%) of these library patrons speak a language other than English. In fact, the Borough is home to individuals of 160 nationalities. Queens Borough Public Library's New Americans Program (NAP) was established in 1977 to provide special services to the area's many new immigrants. (www.queenslibrary.org/programs/nap/aboutnap.asp)

In the early 1960's, Greensboro, North Carolina, was the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. In the new millennium, Greensboro, a mid-sized southern city, is home to immigrants

and refugees from around the world. In an effort to provide library services and equal access to information for new Americans, the Greensboro Public Library founded a Multicultural Center. The library's multicultural center offers ESOL classes and programs, conversation classes, and foreign language collections. (<http://www.greensborolibrary.org/mrc/>) In addition, the Greensboro Public Library and its Friends group are sponsoring the One City, One Book project. This year, all of Greensboro is reading *The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community* by Mary Pipher. The book focuses on understanding the challenges and opportunities a community faces when it becomes home for thousands of immigrants and refugees. (<http://www.greensborolibrary.org/onecityonebook/>) For more about Greensboro and the library's active role in literacy go to www.BuildLiteracy.org and click on "Collective Wisdom."

Most people associate libraries with literacy and rightly so. Public libraries have a long history of offering a broad range of literacy services. This conventional wisdom was confirmed by a 1999 survey conducted by the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois. Here's what we know about libraries and literacy. We know that 94% of the public libraries surveyed provide some kind of literacy services. These services include information and referral, space for tutoring and small group instruction, high interest/low vocabulary book collections, resources for learners, teachers, and tutors, meeting and planning space, and the full spectrum of outreach activities, especially book-mobiles.

We also know that libraries make great community partners! It comes as no surprise that 75% of the public libraries surveyed partner with other agencies and organizations in their

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community to provide effective adult literacy services. Community literacy partners include volunteer tutor organizations, local school systems, health care providers, social service agencies, government agencies, and community colleges. This is the short list! I am always amazed by the creativity of librarians and literacy providers.

The effectiveness of library literacy partnerships in urban cities and rural communities across the U.S. led to the development of ALA's partnership building Web site, www.BuildLiteracy.org. BuildLiteracy.org, funded by Verizon, provides libraries and literacy programs with the tools they need to build literacy partnerships in their community. The website features:

- **The Literacy Readiness Inventory (LRI):** the LRI helps libraries and literacy programs identify, articulate, and reflect upon how they approach literacy.

- **The Capacity Building Tool Kit** helps libraries and literacy programs develop the skills they need to build or enhance their own community-specific literacy partnership. The Tool Kit includes information on:

- assessing community needs
- demonstrating financial commitment
- developing partnerships and advocacy efforts
- promoting literacy-related outreach efforts
- maximizing technology,
- improving grant writing skills

BuildLiteracy.org also includes real voices of remarkable partnership builders. Several library directors told us their stories. They shared strategies, identified essential keys to building and sustaining successful partnerships, and even shared a few bloopers that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that everyone makes mistakes.

Rita Maupin is the director of the Calhoun County (Florida) Public Library. The library is small and rural and serves a large county with a small population. The idea of partnering isn't new to the library. Since 1986 the library has crossed county borders to work with others. Lots of factors

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Libraries and Literacy Providers Continued

contributed to the development of literacy partnership, but most partnerships involved the library's friends.

The library's goal is to create a literate community one adult and one child at a time. The library accomplishes this by working with community partners on the development and delivery of programs and services. The Calhoun County Public Library is the only library in Florida to administer an Even Start Program. The program is run by a certified teacher and offers on-site and home-based programs and bilingual education. In addition, the library uses the Kenan family literacy model in their Parent and Child Success Academy. This library-based initiative requires intense collaboration between county judges, probation officers, school resource officers, and counselors. (For Rita's full story, go to www.BuildLiteracy.org and click on "Collective Wisdom.")

Dwight McInvaill is the director of the Georgetown (South Carolina) Public Library. Georgetown is a coastal community between Charleston and Myrtle Beach. The library was established as South Carolina's third library society in 1799. Today, Georgetown

County has a 33% illiteracy rate. The library focuses its literacy partnership efforts on both children and adults.

The children's literacy partnership was initiated in June 1999 when the governor signed into law the First Steps program. First Steps is an early childhood education initiative designed to ensure that the state's children begin first grade healthy and ready to learn. The law mandated the formation of county partnerships to develop early childhood services. It also mandated that libraries be included in this effort!

The library's First Steps program



was an enormous success. Success was achieved through good strategic planning, intensive relationship building, and a little luck. The Georgetown Public Library and the First Steps initiative worked with 42 child-care facilities, distributed 5,286 books through partnerships with the county library, served 72 families through Parents as Teachers visits, and improved access to healthcare services for 45 families. For its efforts, the library received the National Association of Counties Care for Kids Award. Georgetown Public Library was the first library ever to win this award! (For Dwight's full story go to www.BuildLiteracy.org and click on "Collective Wisdom.")

I hope that these stories inspire you to check out the programs, resources, services, and of course, the books at your local library. I also hope that you will take the time to tell the librarian, the outreach coordinator, or anyone who will listen about your family literacy program. I am confident that this sharing of information will open the door to a dialogue that will lead to collaboration and partnerships between libraries and family literacy programs. I know that librarians and literacy providers share a common goal and that is to find ways to provide better library and literacy services to everyone in the community.

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