

Columbus

Public Library

Innovative Solutions to Bridging Community Divisions

Location: Columbus, WI

Staff Size: 6.4 FTE

Service Area: 15,000



For much of its history, Columbus was a rural community, but today it is quickly becoming a commuter town. Feeling the effects of this rapid change, the Columbus Public Library joined the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative to learn how to add more value in the community beyond being a lender of books. Not only has Columbus Public Library built a stronger reputation as an institution that can help solve community challenges, but its director—a newcomer to the community—has become a stronger, more credible community leader in the process.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Columbus Public Library held Community Conversations to learn what kind of progress the community wanted to achieve.
- ▶ Through this engagement they saw that, despite divides in the community, people wanted the same things: a better-connected community with more trust, where people knew one another.
- ▶ Through the Root for Columbus initiative, library staff gathered people to help discover ways the library could help the community address problems and improve community cooperation, leveraging the reputation of the library as a neutral convener.
- ▶ Because the library has requested feedback from the community and used it to guide their work, they now enjoy greater community support, library card sign-ups are up, there is more community will to build a new library (something that wasn't possible before), and the library director is in a stronger position to support change in the community.

Background

When Cindy Fesemyer joined the Columbus (Wis.) Public Library as director in 2012, she not only was stepping into a new profession but also into an unfamiliar community of 5,000 people.

A resident of Madison, about 30 miles southwest of Columbus, Fesemyer had worked in nonprofit administration for years before returning to graduate school for her MLIS degree. Spurring her midlife career change was the desire to connect to the heart of a community through its public library.

But for Fesemyer and her colleagues at the library, building these connections proved particularly difficult. "In rural America there is definitely an insider and outsider vibe," she said, "folks that have lived here for generations versus the 'newcomers' who have lived here for 10 years."

Once home to a thriving downtown, in recent decades Columbus has lost many small businesses and family farms. While the community remains small, it is changing; the town recently has seen an influx of Madison commuters drawn by strong public schools, as well as a sizeable community of Hispanic residents. Local leadership has been unable to bridge both

worlds and meet the needs of both the newer and longtime residents.

Progress Made

For nearly two years, Columbus Public Library has been part of the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative, a partnership between the American Library Association (ALA) and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the initiative reimagines the role libraries can play in supporting communities, giving library professionals like Fesemyer training and resources to help them strengthen their roles as core community leaders and change agents.

In the last two years, the Columbus Public Library has redefined its mission and place in the community. At the same time, it has shifted from a provider of reading materials and meeting space into a leader in the quest to remake the physical and cultural landscape of the town. As part of its new role, the library has been working to bring Columbus's established and new voices to the same table, helping community members find common ground to work together on things that matter to the entire community. This work has made a tangible difference.

- ▶ The library has launched Root for Columbus, an initiative that began with engaging residents around their shared aspirations for their community



but has since led to a series of locally driven projects that are addressing challenges in the community, building a sense of civic pride, and creating more trust and stronger relationships among community members.

- ▶ The number of library card-holders has increased, as has the library's social media activity.
- ▶ The library has strengthened its position as an important player in helping the community move forward on things that matter to the people in Columbus. As a result, the City of Columbus is conducting a feasibility study to see if the municipality can support building a new community center with the library as an anchor tenant. The 102-year-old Carnegie library is simply out of space and can no longer offer all the materials and services it should.
- ▶ The library has become a catalyst for change across Wisconsin. Other libraries and communities have taken notice of the good things happening in Columbus and have invited the team to share what they've done with regional and state library groups.

Fesemyer herself, once considered an outsider, has built stronger relationships across Columbus and has strengthened her position as a community

leader. And while there is still work to do, the Columbus Public Library is at the center of getting things done in this once-rural, increasingly "bedroom community"—and building a can-do spirit in the process.

Their Journey

Fesemyer learned about the LTC initiative in 2014, first through an email distribution list and then at an ALA conference. ALA invited public libraries across the country to be part of an 18-month cohort of 10 libraries that would learn from The Harwood Institute how to Turn Outward—that is, how to use deep knowledge of the community as the reference point for choices and actions.

Fesemyer applied for Columbus Public Library to be part of the cohort and assembled a project team of five people, herself included, from the library community. The team was trained along with other cohort members at a three-day Harwood Public Innovators Lab in spring 2014.

During the Lab, the team learned how to listen more effectively to their community and how to develop programs that would solve problems and improve the way people in the community work together. After the Lab they hit the ground running and began leading a series of small, informal, "kitchen table-style"



Top: Columbus LTC team members: Shawn Brommer, youth services and outreach consultant; Katrina Dombrowsky, youth services director; resident Mary Lou Sharpe; Cindy Fesemyer, library director; and Bruce Smith, community liaison/service specialist.

Bottom three photos: The Columbus team participate in LTC potlucks and pose with the Root for Columbus tree.



In one LTC-related project, the library worked with local artists to transform public benches into works of art.

conversations focused on shared aspirations for the community, using Harwood's Community Conversation model. They started with groups that were easy to reach out to, like a group of retired teachers and the Rotary Club.

"We started with the groups where we could just make the phone calls and get it on the

agenda," she said. "After the initial four conversations we started reaching a little bit deeper."

In addition to several invite-only gatherings, the LTC team hosted two open conversations, inviting anyone in the community to participate. The turnout for these conversations was lower than expected; as they tried various

approaches, the team found that some worked better than others. Church affiliation, for example, is strong in Columbus, and the LTC team initially identified several religious communities to include. Their overtures were not returned, though.

"What church you belong to really defines your place in the community," Fesemyer said. "These Community Conversations never happened. We tried and tried, but it just didn't happen. Eventually we had to let it go."

The team also had trouble getting others at the library involved. Fesemyer and Katrina Dombrowsky, the library's youth services director, were both part of the local LTC team, but the project never caught on with the other 10 members of the library's staff—all part-time employees.

Fesemyer tried different ways to engage the part-time staff, including Harwood's Turn Quiz, which allows people to assess the extent to which they are focused internally as opposed to focused outwardly to the community, and the Aspirations exercise, a quick tool that helps focus a discussion on the kind of community people want and the conditions needed to get there.

"We tried three or four different ways to pull them in and talk about what they wanted in their

community and see how the library could take part,” Fesemyer said. “They were getting frustrated. They felt like we were asking the same questions over and over and thinking, ‘This doesn’t apply to me.’”

Ultimately, the LTC team moved on, accepting that it was OK if the larger library staff wasn’t engaged initially in the Turning Outward efforts.

“It hasn’t dampened the project,” she said, adding that while they didn’t participate, she regularly updates them on the status of LTC. “It’s been kind of empowering to the five-person team to come to the realization that we could let it go.”

The team began to see some small wins as they harnessed the energy of working in the community differently. For example, the team hosted a Community Conversation between the chamber of commerce and the Downtown Economic Development Commission, thereby bringing together two groups that had not always worked well together. After the LTC team extended the invitation, the two groups met in a vacant storefront in the downtown they each aspired to reinvigorate.

Once the conversation started, they began to see how much they had in common. The LTC



...the team hosted a Community Conversation between the chamber of commerce and the Downtown Economic Development Commission, thereby bringing together two groups that had not always worked well together ... Once people started talking, though, they realized they shared common ground.

team heard many of the same themes they had heard in similar conversations around town.

“We all realized that they had shared aspirations and the groups had not been able to see them,” Fesemyer said. “They had a somewhat dysfunctional history, but they all heard each

other. There were some folks who wanted to take a chance on something new.”

Initially, Fesemyer thought the Community Conversations would rehash long-standing issues in town, such as dealing with flood plains, taxes and roads. Once people started talking,

though, they realized they shared common ground. They wanted to try new things to improve the community, like reinvigorating the downtown. All they needed was a neutral party willing to step up and help lead. The Community Conversations empowered Fesemyer, and others, to be those leaders.

“(People) can sit in a room for two hours and not argue about old stuff and aspire to create something cool in their community,” Fesemyer said. “That, in itself, is a shift.”

To augment what they were learning from the Community Conversations, Fesemyer and her team created a Root for Columbus tree. Residents of any age were asked to write their aspirations for the community on a tag and tie it to the tree, which was erected at town landmarks like the local hospital, a bank, the elementary school and the library. The tree served not only as a valuable way to solicit input from a wide variety of people, but also as a recognizable symbol of Columbus’ attempt to engage the community.

Fesemyer’s team took what they had learned from their conversations, along with the nearly 500 suggestions from the tree, and put them into a spreadsheet. They used this list as a guide to understand the kind of community people wanted, the

challenges they saw in getting there, and where people saw potential for common ground in moving forward.

Building from the concept of Root for Columbus, the LTC group decided to similarly brand their entire effort. To move from conversations to action, the group hosted a Root for Columbus Action Community Potluck.

Before the potluck, the five-member LTC team expanded, inviting 10 people who emerged during the Community Conversations as people who might be trusted by the community’s new and old guards. Seven of them joined the team, making a group of 12 available to organize and facilitate projects resulting from the tree and conversations. A perceived leadership gap in Columbus was beginning to close.

While Fesemyer and her team initially struggled to engage religious communities and the staff of the library itself, additions to the leadership team now include a Methodist minister and the library’s new adult services library assistant. These new additions speak directly to the benefits of keeping communication channels open despite initial difficulties. Other new leadership members include several other residents who vary in age and background.

The first Root for Columbus potluck was a facilitated night of talking, eating and committing to participate in different projects. Small groups brainstormed ideas and reported back to the larger group. Four projects were planned by participants in small groups. Three of the projects were later completed; the fourth required intervention from other government agencies that has delayed the project.

- ▶ One was the whimsical “Gnomes Away from Home.” During summer 2015, every few weeks garden gnomes appeared somewhere in town. Clues to the gnomes’ locations were posted via social media, and families and residents were encouraged to post their own shots when they found the gnomes. This was a seemingly small but tangible way for the community to begin building connections between and among residents and to explore the area while promoting the community with their social media efforts.
- ▶ Another project was the clean-up of a new park next to the town’s Amtrak station. The station, often considered the “front door” of Columbus, now has a more welcoming look.
- ▶ A third project involved various community groups coming together to transform public benches into works of art.

Unveiled at the annual Friday Night Out that kicks off the library's summer reading program, the benches were placed in public locations throughout town, a constant reminder that positive work is being done in Columbus.

- ▶ The final project, still in the works, started with what the group called "Community Reminisce," a gathering that brought community members together to share memories of life events in the Columbus Pavilion, a landmark in the center of town.

The various projects all include signage showing their affiliation with Root for Columbus. Those who take ownership of the projects resulting from the potlucks receive a yard sign that says "I root for Columbus." Yard and window signs are sprouting up all over town.

Marylou Sharpee, a retired Columbus teacher, 41-year local resident, library trustee and member of the Columbus LTC team, said she sees a big change. Residents now realize that they can be part of efforts that have a big impact around town. The beautification of the "front door" train station, for instance, has led not only to more pride in the town's appearance but also to an appreciation that things in Columbus can change.

"People are talking and coming up with ideas that help Columbus," Sharpee said. "They say, 'Hey, that looks good in Columbus, and if we can do that, we can do something else.' It gives people confidence, and that confidence is what I've seen, plus a really nice park around the train station."

As the dialogue has shifted, so has the perception of the library.

"It's a place where everybody is welcome," Sharpee said. "I guess you know that inherently, but it's never been put into words. The power of the library to be a place of innovation was not something that I thought about. That was exciting to me."

Moving Forward

This isn't the first time people have tried to change things in Columbus—but in the past, more ambitious, larger-scale projects lost momentum and grew stagnant, Sharpee said. But with Root for Columbus, people can see the tangible results of small, successful endeavors, and that enthusiasm builds momentum to accomplish more. There is also an opportunity for new people to participate.

"I think this project has allowed new leadership to feel secure and supported," Sharpee said. "I thought Turning Outward was a lovely idea that had been tried before. It hadn't been."

For Katrina Dombrowsky, the library's youth services director, the work will continue to evolve as the town evolves. The LTC initiative gave the community some momentum to begin to change, and to embrace the library's role in that change.

"When this started, I couldn't really envision what the outcome would be, and I don't think I was the only one," she said. "It's really exciting to see what's come of it and be able to tell people Root for Columbus and the potlucks are the result of our Harwood training."

The skills learned through LTC are now spreading throughout Wisconsin.

"In the calendar year of 2015 I probably have worked with three to five other libraries using Libraries Transforming Communities methods," said Shawn Brommer, the library's youth services and outreach consultant. "I'm finding the methods, techniques and the process really work for many types of projects, whether helping libraries examine their planning documents or making smaller changes to their programming schedules."

Throughout the LTC initiative, Fesemyer has grappled with her own role in Columbus. A member of the Columbus Literacy Council and a Rotarian, she was already active in the community before

LTC. In this small town, though, she wondered where exactly she fit in.

"I felt like a little bit of a fraud," she said. "I don't live in Columbus and I won't be uprooting my family so we can. My biggest crisis was my ability to tell the community I served that I belonged at the heart of transformation."

Fesemyer has since come to realize that at the heart of the transformation is not her, but the institution of the library. By using her Harwood training to engage the community in a deeper way, she has come to know the town and its concerns. She could speak with authority and was willing to step in and help bridge the long-standing divide in town.

"It doesn't sound radical now, but it's a very radical notion to have the public library reflect the community back in that way. To do it intentionally is very powerful."

"It's the library and not me," she said. "I really do know a lot about the community. I see both sides in a way, and the fact that I don't have a vested interest because I don't live here, I don't pay taxes here, and my kids don't go to school here—that helped people trust me a little bit more."

While Fesemyer shifted her career to library administration because she wanted to connect with a community, LTC has transformed her.

"It's really clear to me how, over the last year and a quarter, my mind has just changed," she said. "I now can't imagine thinking you are serving the community through its library without knowing what the community wants. It has really just taken hold. It doesn't sound radical now, but it's a very radical notion to have the public library reflect the community back in that way. To do it intentionally is very powerful." ■