

 CASE STUDY

George McCone Memorial County Library



Location

Circle, Montana

Staff Size

1 FTE

Service Area

1,500

With funding from the American Library Association's *Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries* initiative, George McCone Memorial County Library in Circle, Montana bought books to combat the rise in misinformation that struck the small town. Grant funding also provided resources and community conversations about music education that enabled the library to step up after the sole music teacher in town retired.

Mary James is the Library Director at George McCone Memorial County Library, which serves the small town of Circle, Montana. Circle has a population of 600, but the library often pulls patrons from the surrounding, tri-county area, bringing the number of patrons it serves to around 1,500. Although Mary does not work in a

full-time capacity, she is the only person who works at the library 5 days a week. While she has a couple of staff members who each spend about 10 hours per week helping her in the library, it is not uncommon for her to spend a day or two a week alone there, especially on Saturdays.

According to Mary, the town of Circle has a "profound need" for its library, and the library is focused on serving the town's aging population. Over the past decade, Circle has lost much of its younger population, who Mary refers to as the town's "missing generation." This generation began leaving the town en masse



Mary James, Library Director at George McCone Memorial County Library



in the late 80s and early 90s, when a large-scale embargo and several droughts left the community with few opportunities and even fewer resources, causing many small farms to fail and a lot of young people to leave and search elsewhere for jobs. However, Mary explains, many younger people have since returned to Circle, and they are trying their hand at farming again, albeit in a different way than their predecessors. There are also more K-12 students in Circle today, which means that the library is now more important than ever and must work to drum up resources to service a town where, as Mary explains, *“there’s not a lot of money.”*

COMBATING MISINFORMATION IN A SMALL TOWN

In the first year after receiving a Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Focus on

Small and Rural Libraries grant, Mary’s library directed some of the funds toward acquiring civics books to distribute to the community. Circle was a town that had been hit hard by misinformation, and Mary’s library was eager to play a role in correcting the problem. Books that explained how the government worked did not exist in her library before the LTC grant. Now, the library has plenty of them. Mary supplemented the acquisition of civics books by writing articles in the local newspaper about “the miracle of representative democracy.” She published a series of articles all around the 4th of July, to garner interest and readership. Her efforts bore fruit and she received a lot of feedback from the community. Mary also distributed flyers with the contact information of local, state, and federal

representatives and encouraged patrons and community members to contact politicians and learn for themselves about how representative democracy really works by going through the proper channels.

THE LIBRARY STEPS IN TO BRING BACK THE MUSIC

For the library’s second round of LTC funding, Mary shifted her focus from civics to music. As she explained, the town’s music teacher was, after many years of service, retiring. Mary wanted to fill the gap that the teacher’s retirement would leave behind. This would be a challenge for the schools, she thought, in particular because hiring a new music teacher promised to be a difficult task. According to Mary, when applicants heard about the town’s isolation, and the fact that the nearest Walmart or supermarket

was over one hundred miles away, they would not be likely to take the position. So Mary and the library stepped in.

They hosted a community conversation focused on what the town could do to support the music department, even without a music teacher. One of the results of the conversation, which 10 people attended, was the idea to jumpstart a micro-lending program for music lessons. That lessons would be micro-lended meaning that patrons would not have to dedicate huge amounts of time and money for hours of music lessons, but that they could simply sign up for one or two, whenever money and schedules allowed. James says that since ***“no one in town is able to make a living offering instruction only, it is impossible to imagine balancing a full load of students with their current daily responsibilities.”*** Micro-lending would offer people the ability to take one or two students and with the many hands lighter workload model, be able to offer a number of students instruction that they needed.

In this way, Mary hoped to foster more participation within her community. Mary also bought sheet music. Sheet music, however, is highly specialized and expensive. So instead of continuing to purchase it, she came up with the idea to collect people’s used and unused sheet music to store in the library and provide to patrons taking micro-lessons.

Mary also has other ideas about how she can use LTC funds to further the library’s music initiatives. One idea is to revive the community’s tradition of hosting a town musical and to add to the town a non-denominational choir that will pass through the town and sing Christmas carols during the holidays. Mary also has another idea—a “big ask”—to refurbish some of the houses in the town that are falling apart and either give them to or subsidize them for new music teachers. That way, she thinks, more qualified music teachers will be incentivized to come teach and live in Circle.

The needs of rural libraries are different than those of larger,

more urban libraries. Because towns like Circle often have so few resources, libraries are the places where community members often go—not just for books, but for information, for services, and for help. And even when a small library like George McCone is decently funded, the small amount of money they have still isn’t enough to meet their communities’ many needs, even small ones like providing them information about local gas prices. ***“I don’t see anybody else helping people with stuff like that”*** Mary told us. She described other needs her community has, like the need for a TV and movie library, and a board game collection. These things, though they may seem silly, are essential for families who want to spend time together, especially when they live in a small town like Circle where there is not much to do, recreationally. In a place like that, families rely on libraries to provide them with spaces and tools to pass the time, to build connections, and to strengthen relationships. ■

Written by Knology. Knology is a nonprofit research organization that produces practical social science for a better world. The organization pursues this goal to help professionals in a variety of sectors build inclusive, informed, and cooperative societies that can thrive together with the natural systems on which we all depend. As a transdisciplinary collective of over 30 social scientists, writers, and educators, the organization’s work process is built on equity, transparency, and deliberation.