Community Libraries
Let Us Praise the Last Great Civic Place

BY RANDALL H. REID

Books are powerful. Bibliophiles have long known that a chance encounter with a book can change a life, altering an individual’s perceptions or inspiring a lifelong passion. Yet a library is more than the sum of its collections of books, tapes, DVDs, and electronic networks. Libraries may be praised as the last great civic place in many American communities, boldly preserving our Jeffersonian belief in democratic community building through an informed citizenry.

During a recent celebration of Sarasota County receiving the Florida Library Association’s Library of the Year Award, I shared the following thoughts with our county libraries’ staff:

I recognize that my own life has been a process of being influenced by a caring community of “real” people and “real” places. The public library continues to serve me as one of those “real places,” but also allows me to be exposed, within the volumes I read, to the thoughts and experiences of people and places I will certainly never meet nor travel to see personally.

The library has always been a timeless place for me; a place of unlimited experiences where I was not limited by my local geography, imagination, or economic status. I will always seek to allow such places to exist in the communities I manage, despite fiscal difficulties or the need to adapt to technological changes, as my respect for people requires that such places continue to exist. Libraries should remain among the principal civic spaces or infrastructure of any healthy community.

Library Programs Support Community Building and Shared Values

My observation that libraries are high in the hierarchy of community venues is shared by community consultants such as Peter Block, author of Community: The Structure of Belonging. During my tenure in Alachua County, Florida, after reading Block’s book in an organizational reading circle, county staff held a series of community conversations to familiarize citizens with local fiscal conditions and allow them to discuss budget priorities in small groups. In an earlier effort in Martin County, Florida, discussion Sundays were held at the local library, where panels of civic leaders and national speakers addressed and answered questions on important community issues.

Currently in Sarasota County, our Tech Teens program is based on a successful program at the Free Public Library of Philadelphia, through which youth volunteers are trained to assist other citizens with basic computer operations at their local libraries. Teens gain job skills, work experience, and self-confidence while contributing to their community and modeling learning skills for younger students.

Shared community values and inspired community engagement are achieved through national programs, such as One Book/One Community, which began with the question, “What if everyone in the community read the same book?” Since 2003, Sarasota County Libraries have hosted One Book, bringing people together to discuss a featured title and participate in events that explore the book’s themes. This program is successful because of the involvement of a coalition of schools, literacy councils, libraries, book clubs, arts and cultural organizations, human services agencies, and businesses. This year, The Hunger Games trilogy inspired a partnership with All Faiths Food Bank to feed the hungry in our community through an interfaith religious network.

Strongholds of Civic Neutrality and Collaborative Community Building

Library community rooms symbolically represent the ancient central council houses common to villages of indigenous cultures, where conversations
about the village’s needs and challenges were held. In this era of contentious political divisions, libraries serve as community strongholds of civic neutrality, safe places for objective reasoning and dialogue. They are centers for lifelong learning and provide access to the tools needed to adapt to a changing world. Library conference rooms and cubicles serve as incubators for small-business start-ups as well as self-directed career counseling centers, after-school safe study havens, and egalitarian portals for educational resources, accessible to all.

Public libraries can also serve as laboratories for collaborative community building. Our Osprey Library was constructed in partnership with local civic groups, including Historic Spanish Point and the Friends of the Osprey Library. Osprey is the county’s first “connections” library, based on the King County, Washington, model, offering online access to the resources of the entire library system in a modest space (630 square feet) with sustainable operating costs.

In the North Sarasota Library, “Prime Time Family Reading” is a six-week program of reading, storytelling, and discussion, serving families who are not regular users of the public library. Sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council with supplemental funding from the Gulf Coast Community Foundation and the Friends of the Library, Prime Time uses outstanding children’s books to stimulate discussion about humanities themes and situations encountered in everyday life. The goal is community building—bonding families around the act of reading and learning, reinforcing the role of the family, and encouraging parents and children to become lifelong, active library users. We believe that learning to read is a proactive step toward enhanced job prospects, higher incomes, and, perhaps, reduced incarceration rates.

The new Selby Library Teen Center in the City of Sarasota was developed as a part of our Youth Services Strategic Plan, based on research from neighboring Pasco County. The center provides a safe environment for teens to explore their academic and creative potential. Teen Advisory Board and Community Youth Development members participated in the design, which features dedicated computer space, flexible programming and performance space, and casual seating areas. The center is supported by a $50,000 grant from the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation.

Adapting, Innovating, and Asserting the Library’s Noble Role

Libraries can become essential collaborative centers for civic engagement and adaptive community learning. Librarians, who suffer from many stereotypes, must create a new image of institutional innovator and assertive community educator for this transformation to succeed. Already, libraries are evolving into decentralized civic service centers, staffed with capable knowledge workers who help citizens complete social services forms and employment applications and access needed information. The ability of libraries to survive and thrive in the future will depend on the ability of professional librarians to adapt, innovate, and lead their noble institutions beyond traditional models into a new world of civic service delivery.

There are those who will debate whether a sustainable and bright future exists for community libraries in the face of technological changes, electronic literature, and unwilling taxpayers, but I am confident in the power of the written word to inspire, inform, and transform our citizenry. The hunger and recognition for the benefits of literacy and civic involvement runs deep in our American heritage. Thomas Jefferson, who gave works from his own personal library to establish the Library of Congress, would surely take pride in these localized efforts to strengthen the democratic fabric of an informed citizenry through our community library systems.

Reference


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