Libraries re-invented

Is the library still relevant in the Internet age? Here's a resounding yes from American libraries that are broadening the scope of services that they offer and turning into community hubs.

By FRANK WITSL

WHEN Dina Bryant needed a place to live, she found a home away from home at the Detroit Public Library. Libraries have long been repositories of knowledge, mostly through arranging, cataloguing books, and places to go during school holidays. In an age of the Internet and Amazon.com, communities are trying to do more with these institutions as communities turn to them for help.

Now libraries are helping people find housing, jobs and a new start in their life.

Bryant, 51, credits the Detroit library's Parkman branch – a place she visited as a young girl with her aunt – with saving her when she was homeless. Librarian Annette Lotharp told her about a housing programme and put her in touch with a counsellor who found Bryant shelter and, within a year, a house to rent.

"It was a sad story, initially, but then, it ended up being a happy ending," Bryant says, as she tells her story in a quiet corner of the stately branch off Oakman Boulevard in Detroit, United States.

"The library had a big part in my success.

Bryant – who is divorced and raising a ten-year-old daughter – graduated from secondary school, attended college for a while, and worked a variety of jobs, mostly temporary positions in customer service.

Still, the mother says she also suffered from ulcerative colitis, an inflammatory bowel disease that would flare up and make it difficult to work.

In 2015, she got sick, missed too many days at the Detroit Employment Solutions Corp, and lost her job. She fell behind on property taxes, lost her house, and moved in with her sister. She became depressed. But the library, Bryant says, gave her a place to go.

At the library, she and her daughter could both study. Bryant focused on getting a college degree, which she eventually earned from ITT Technical Institute. Her daughter got help with her homework. Bryant says the library was her "window to the Internet, to access to look for, and find, a job."

"You could stay all day," she says. "That was such a godsend to me."

Changing perceptions

In many American cities and communities, people living in the summer – libraries are places where residents go to cool off, check out books, play video games, and meet friends. Libraries are places where people come to read and borrow and that are bringing in more residents from surrounding communities.

Now, there are nearly 11,500 libraries in the United States – including public, academic, school, and special libraries, according to the American Library Association, a Chicago-based non-profit.

The association noted a shift from print to digital services in a 2014 report, "The State of America's Libraries." It said that in the year before the report was published the number of visitors to libraries had declined 5%, but the visits to library websites had grown up 5%.

The report also identified a top priority for libraries: Enhance "community engagement" to address "current social, economic, and environmental issues," through partnerships with governments and other organisations.

In other words: Help people who are struggling.

Some libraries have gone as far as employing full-time counsellors to help do this. In March, the Public Library Association conference in Philadelphia held a session on "A Social Worker Walks Into a Library," with presenters from libraries in Washington DC, San Francisco, Denver and Texas that had hired social workers.

"One of the questions people ask is: "In the age of the Internet, Google, and Amazon, is there a role for the public library?" Smith says. "I tell you I give you a resounding yes."

A cool place to learn

During this year's long mid-summer holiday season, the Detroit Public Library – through select locations – will host students in kindergarten through year three a six-week reading programme.

It is one of many programmes and scholastic activities that libraries offer to assist families that can't afford summer camps and enriching programmes that research shows help students from forgetting what they learned during their time off from school.

"Enlighten and empower"

Among public libraries, the Detroit library system boasts that it is the fourth largest in the United States by volume, just behind libraries in Boston, New York, and Cincinnati, and ahead of libraries in cities with even larger populations, including Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia.

The system is relatively simple: to enlighten and empower people to make their way in this world."

Detroit library spokesman A.J. Funches says: "As more people move into the city – following the resuscitation of Detroit – there's going to be a resurgence of Detroit's library, too.

""The library of Detroit opened in 1817, 20 years before Michigan became a state. It became the Detroit Public Library in 1865 and is now the second largest library system in the state (after the University of Michigan Library) with more than 7.2 million volumes and 21 branches, 19 of which are open. The collection includes rare books, historical documents, and special music by black artists."

In addition to the programmes offered by libraries, other groups are using the institutions to help deliver services. For instance, through Detroit library branches, the United Way of south-east Michigan is giving children who sign up the chance to use computer software, ABC Mouse, that is designed to enhance reading skills at no charge.

Esméralda Torres of south-west Detroit enrolled two of her three children – her six-year-old and eight-year-old daughter – in the programme to boost their reading and English language skills.

"My little girl has been having trouble reading," Torres, 36, says. "It's like a supplement, on the side that helps keep her English skills going while she is learning Spanish. This really, really is a blessing to have." Torres found help at her local library for everything from finding a house to getting a job.

From 9pm to 9pm, Monday through Thursday, 16 children at one branch have started the reading programme.

The branch also is offering youngsters free lunches, arts and crafts classes, a reading programme for older children, ballet lessons, and sessions to teach kids and adults how to use and to the and programme computers.

The director of recruiting for the Wayne County Sheriff's Office, Keith Williams, even stops by to entice older teens and adults into careers in law enforcement.

"It's so good for the students," reading teacher Nakia Hopkins says. "This is a community hub."

Making hard choices

Still, library directors say that to add services they must make the case to elected officials, donors, and taxpayers who allow them the funding they need.

They also have to make some hard choices.

"Our funding is always something we have to fight for," says Devon Green, Pontiac library director. "We have to show we are serving the public and how we are serving them. You have people say: 'You don't need the library, but that's not true.'"

Sitting in one of the poorest cities in Oakland County, the Pontiac library is so vital that once a month, volunteers serve to offer meals to hungry residents.

"We're a library, but everyone misses something important," says Green, who estimated the library has hosted more than 4000 meals for groups over the past year. "We're really like the community center."

In the next few years, Green says, the library also would like to find ways to reach residents who don't have transportation to get to it with satellite locations throughout the city and possibly a van or small bus that would take publications to the people."

"In some libraries, like Southfield, are still recovering from cuts imposed during the recession. Last year, one of the residents spent months a couple decades ago designing what kind of library the city needed and ultimately decided to build a new one that was nearly three times the size of the one it replaced.

"It was meant to be a beacon to downtown and the city overall," says City Librarian Dave Ewrick, who called the design visionary. "It's one of the best things we've got in the city, and it does living people from neighbouring communities."

Ewrick counters that libraries are imperilled by reduced funding and cuts, "by arguing that libraries supply residents reliable information.

"We need more," he says. "This will give you 60 million answers. The librarians will help you find the one you want."

But, Ewrick says, the library also is still reeling from cuts in hours and employees that were made at the height of the US recession. It also still faces many decisions about what services to add and how to pay for them.

'Being with family'

Libraries also are aiming to be places where people can't afford to go to concert halls and museums anymore. As you can see and the Southfield library spent US$500,000 (RM2mil) to buy Marshall Fredericks' 1954 'Head of a Virgin' sculpture, which had been at a now-closed mall, and other artwork. On Friday afternoon, Molly Higgins, 37, of Ann Arbor, took her two sons, aged five and five-and-four, respectively – to the Southfield library for the first time. They admired the Fredericks' "Take a picture," Sam, smiling, begged, his mother says. "Take a picture."

In growing communities, the librarians are growing – but also transforming.

A new, larger north branch of the Southfield-Michigan Public Library is in the works and scheduled to open in 2020. "It's not just about being the thing people think of when they think of libraries," says Jamie Morris, the library's head of community relations.

"But it's not just for housing books, for people to come and be a part of the community."

In Detroit, Bryant – who now has a home away from the Parkman branch – says she isn't sure if she'll use the library, just not every day like before. "It's kind of relaxing just to come in to get a book and to have an adventure by reading it, by expanding my knowledge," Bryant says. "I'm always so happy to be at the library because it's warm, like being with family."

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