

Portland State University

PDXScholar

English Faculty Publications and Presentations

English

3-7-2022

Serving the Entire Community: How the Multnomah County Library Ensures a Welcoming, Safe Space for All

Kathi Inman Berens

Portland State University, kberens@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_fac



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Berens, Kathi Inman (2022). "Serving the Entire Community: How the Multnomah County Library Ensures a Welcoming, Safe Space for All," Publishers Weekly.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

Serving the Entire Community

How the Multnomah County Library works to ensure a welcoming, safe space for all

By KATHI INMAN BERENS

In spring 2020, the Multnomah County (Ore.) Library faced a host of issues impacting libraries across the nation: How to serve the community during a historic pandemic that saw schools and libraries close for an extended period? And how to respond to a racial and social justice awakening that requires systemic change?

Like many libraries across the nation MCL librarians have been quick to meet their community's needs. Following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis, the library licensed more e-books and digital audiobooks about white supremacy and racial justice, for example, and undertook more sharing agreements to meet the surging demand for resources. MCL representatives say that in 2020, Layla F. Saad's *Me and White Supremacy* was the library's most checked-out e-book, and *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi was the most checked-out audiobook.

But perhaps the most important response, librarians say, was to listen to the community. "Before we reopened our buildings, staff led a process of community engagement," says Shawn Cunningham, director of MCL communications and strategic initiatives, "to reach out to our culturally and linguistically specific communities to learn what they value most." Those conversations helped MCL leadership better understand how to make their neighborhood library branches more welcoming to BIPOC and culturally marginalized people, and ultimately, to create new programs and increase resources to existing programs that serve its culturally diverse users.

Though hiring bicultural and multilingual staff has been a priority for years, MCL representatives say that in 2021 the library has enough staff who are members of culturally diverse groups to offer services and programs customized to patrons from those communities. The library's We Speak Your Language program, for example, provides services in Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. MCL also fast-tracked translation services during the pandemic, and invested more resources to make sure all patrons had quick access to information in their own languages. One branch library now has a staff member dedicated to serving patrons who speak Somali.

In addition, the Black Cultural Library Advocates program



A patron gets assistance at the Multnomah County Library.

supports a team dedicated to connecting with Black patrons in library buildings. This means more patrons can walk into their local branches and see, hear, and feel they are welcome. And each branch library has the latitude to create its own themes and programs around specific community needs. "I absolutely love the theme and focus on health and wellness," says Lana Sweeting, Black Cultural Library Advocate at Rockwood Library. "It's a topic that often gets swept under the rug, but to take this time to bring attention to self-care, and taking a step back when we can, is perfect."

Furthermore, several building renovations in previously under-resourced east Multnomah county are kicking off with a community engagement process "focused on our BIPOC youth," says MCL communications strategist Chelsea Bailey. "Each library serves a distinct community and libraries are for the community," she explains, "so it's really important that our community feel reflected in those spaces, in the collection, and among our staff."

One of the more complex pandemic challenges for MCL librarians, meanwhile, is serving those experiencing homelessness—or houselessness, to be more precise. "You can't move the

PLA & Pacific Northwest Spotlight

physical shelter aspect of a library online," Cunningham says. "That was one of the biggest challenges for us at the height of the pandemic: how can we restore services in a way that's sensitive to [houseless] people's needs?"

The library "is one of the few places where [houseless] people feel welcome—a place where they are able to be treated fairly and kindly, have a place to use the restroom, drink water, read books," adds MCL communications specialist Paty Rincon. "A lot of folks spend their days there, have library cards, and access technology." For this community, takeout services like curbside pickup weren't going to help.

MCL responded by expanding its Wi-Fi access 24/7 in the outdoor areas around its physical libraries, and by doubling down on its coordination with the Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services. MCL's on-site social workers offer window service for walk-up assistance at the Central Library on SW 10th Street, an area with many encampments. There, social workers assist in finding resources, shelter, permanent housing, and more.

MCL representatives say it's difficult to know how many houseless people are served by the Wi-Fi and walk-up social services—after all, librarians don't know who is houseless and have no reason to ask, Rincon explains. There are instances, however, when social workers need to know in order to properly assist people. And in the last quarter of 2021, embedded social workers helped 160 unique patrons, 83 of whom reported they were experiencing houselessness.

MCL staff know their success is deeply connected to their commitment to serving the community—the entire community. It's an ethos that runs deep, including in MCL's popular Everybody Reads program, a community-wide project that promotes shared reading and discussion around a single book. This year's book is *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* by Mira Jacob, which Bailey says demonstrates MCL's commitment to engagement, and to not shying away from important issues and conversations, no matter how difficult. ■

Kathi Inman Berens is associate professor of publishing and digital humanities at Portland State University in Oregon.

WANT TO LEARN MORE? VISIT MCL DURING PLA 2022

At PLA 2022, attendees can visit with Multnomah County Library friends to learn more about their commitment to "center equity, inclusion, and belonging as the foundation for lasting, transformational change." Enjoy a cup of tea in the library's BIPOC affinity space, and hear about how to center equity, inclusion, and belonging in a library's community outreach, engagement, marketing and communications, recruitment, and more. Check the PLA program online for more details and for final times and locations. MCL staff look forward to welcoming librarians to their home!



WISE WOLF BOOKS

ROWDY WILD AND MEAN, SHARP AND KEEN

BOOK ONE



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

CHRIS MULLEN

AVAILABLE THROUGH YOUR
FAVORITE BOOKSELLER,
EBOOK THROUGH AMAZON

wisewolfbooks.com