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Start-up Library:

A Report from the Aloha Community Library



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Introduction

“Do you have any idea of what is going on in Aloha?” is how Oregon State Librarian MaryKay Dahlgreen began her speech at the Grand Opening of the Aloha Community Library on September 22, 2012 (Squires, Oct. 4, 2012). The people of Aloha, Oregon have united in an incredibly determined effort to create a library that will serve as a learning resource and gathering space for their growing community, which is nestled in the heart of the Silicon Forest (Wollner, 2015). This article looks at how the Aloha Community Library came to be, exploring its past and present, as well as future plans for growth.

Volunteers

A few talented and entrepreneurial people hatched the idea to open a new library over coffee in January 2011 (Squires, 2012). They used their communication and organizational skills to attract hundreds of volunteers who donated their time and expertise to this unique project. Currently there are about fifty volunteers who contribute their time on a monthly basis, with only two paid staff to help train and manage them. Since the grand opening on September 22, 2012, volunteers have documented over 17,000 hours (Palmer, 2015). This does not include hours from 2011 until opening, or the majority of hours put in by board members, who become so wrapped up in their work that they forget to record their time. It is not possible to mention them all by name, but volunteers are responsible for the creation and operation of this new community library.

Thousands of hours were dedicated to processing books to fill the shelves. A voluminous amount of donated books needed to be sorted to determine whether they would be part of the new collection, sold in a community book sale, or donated to other local charities. Each book in the new collection required cleaning, cataloging, and processing. Many people dedicated their entire summer to make sure the library would be ready to open on time. New friendships were made and volunteers found a sense of purpose working on a project solely dedicated to helping people.

This project attracted people with life experience in education, business and organizational management. These people volunteered to work on the Board of Directors and the Development Committee. They were responsible for obtaining the library’s tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status, planning for the future and fundraising. They have managed matching grant fundraising campaigns, an Amazon.com storefront for online book sales, and fundraising events such as a lovely morning brunch which featured acclaimed Oregonian columnist, Steve Duin. Their amazing efforts have managed to raise enough money to support an annual operating budget of \$100,000 (Palmer, 2015).

Before the library opened, volunteer Library Assistants were recruited and trained to manage the circulation desk, provide ready reference services, and help with the day to day operations of the library. They were trained in the best practices of customer service, signing people up for library cards, checking out books with the LibraryWorld database, and on measures to keep the library a safe place for patrons and staff. In March 2015, they checked out 3,222 items (Palmer, 2015). Their dedication allows the library to be open 37 hours a week. Library Assistants are the public face of the library, and are a major reason patrons keep coming back. They are appreciated beyond measure.

Another remarkable aspect of this new library is the extensive amount of fascinating programs available on a regular basis. Many of these programs are provided for free by peo-



ple in the community with a unique skill or talent that they want to share. The Tualatin Hills Park and Recreation District's Nature Mobile stops by once in a while to teach children about local wildlife. The recurring "Read to the Dogs" program helps young people gain confidence with their reading skills, and helps dogs hear more stories. Volunteer Tech Tutors are available twice a week to help people learn computer skills. Annually, the "Holiday Book-tique" fundraising sale offers unique handmade art, jewelry and crafts generously donated by local artisans. There are two different story-time programs for different age groups and a book club will be starting on May 4th, 2015. One popular program is the "Teen Takeover Night," where sixth to twelfth graders gather for food and fun after the library is closed to the public. One of these events was called "Silence in the Library," a Doctor Who fan night with pizza, costumes and games. Another night was dedicated to the "Science of Special Effects" with a zombie makeover demonstration by Ravenous Studios, who have worked on television shows such as Grimm and Portlandia. For seniors and their families, there was a presentation about the "Villages Without Walls" community in Washington County, where seniors can "age in place" in their own homes with a support network of local volunteers. Crafting aficionados learned how to make "Book Art Flowers," and were able to contribute to the Ezra Jack Keats Community Collage Project. There have been programs donated by local authors, gardeners, aviation enthusiasts, animal shelter experts, and astronomers. There was even a "Dancing in the Stacks" program where professional dancers demonstrated and gave lessons in ballroom dancing. It has been like a childhood fable; where the community comes together to magically lift the spirit of the town ... except it's in real life!



Support From Local Libraries, Government, Schools, Businesses and Community Organizations

As the word got out about what was happening in Aloha, support from local organizations and businesses started pouring in. Donations of bookshelves and furniture, computers and technical support, painting supplies and labor, and architectural design were all found quickly by the outreach efforts of the Board of Directors. Notably, the Beaverton Optimist Club and Jack Franklin designed some wonderful bulletin boards that remind one of summer camp. Betsy Buckel designed the lovely “Book Art Flowers” that now adorn the library’s walls. The community has come together to build a beautiful library.

Since many of its patrons are school-aged, the Aloha Community Library has partnered with the Beaverton School District in the past, and looks to build on this relationship in the future. From the library’s earliest days, support from the Washington County Commissioners has been strong. One of the library’s biggest supporters with technical advice, library materials, and moral support has been Washington County Cooperative Library Services (WCCLS). They set benchmarks that need to be reached before the library can join the cooperative, but they have also done what they can to help achieve those goals. One significant example is the provision of WCCLS barcode stickers so that a possible ILS migration from the current LibraryWorld catalog to WCCLS’s Polaris will be easier. They have even let the library participate in WCCLS’s annual Storytelling Festival by donating programs like “Art of the Story,” in which storyteller Chetter Galloway will share African and African American tales on April 18th, 2015.

WCCLS has designated Cedar Mill Public Library as Aloha’s mentor library, with Executive Director Peter Leonard providing answers to questions and solutions to issues as they arise (Squires, 2014). Cedar Mill is also a non-profit library, which began forty years ago in a similar manner to how the Aloha Community Library is developing now. Using Cedar Mill as a model, the Aloha Community Library hopes to continue to build and sustain community support over the years (Palmer, 2015).


Future Plans

WCCLS Director Eva Calcagno said that “this library cannot be sustained by donations and grants alone. A fully functioning public library serving a community of this size requires government support to assure free, open, and reliable access for the residents.” (Squires, 2014). To this end, WCCLS has included plans for the Aloha Community Library to join the cooperative in the Library Levy on the November 2015 ballot (Mistreanu, 2014). If the levy passes, the library will be on track to join WCCLS by July 2016 (Palmer, 2015). At that point the library will receive county funding and patrons will be able to access materials from all 15 libraries currently in the system. According to Terri Palmer, Director of the Aloha Community Library, this will likely cause circulation statistics to increase rapidly, making the library as busy as many of the other libraries in the system (Apalategui, March 3, 2015).

Conclusion

State Librarian MaryKay Dahlgreen asked the people who gathered for the 2012 Grand Opening, if they had heard people say that we do not need libraries anymore. She then said “You, people, are my prime example when people say that to me. I say ‘Do you know what



they are doing in Aloha? Do you have any idea what they are doing in Aloha!?!’ ... Thank you so much for giving me the story. Because, by golly, I will use it for those people who say libraries are dying” (Squires, 2012). The Aloha Community Library would like to thank everyone who has helped build this new library, and are looking forward to meeting those who want to work with us in the future. 

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