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National Connections: Connecting Locally, Nationally, and Even Internationally

by Dee Goldman
McMinnville Public Library

McMinnville Public Library is a city library, located in McMinnville, the county seat of Yamhill County. The library is part of the Chemeketa Cooperative Regional Library Service (CCRLS) and has a population service district of 38,000. Located in the Mid-Willamette Valley, Yamhill County has a varied economic base including manufacturing, forestry and agriculture. Vineyards and nursery stock are the most rapidly increasing crop types, joining more traditional farm products such as berries, cherries, hazelnuts, grass seed, grain, and livestock. With more year-round agricultural jobs replacing seasonal employment, there has been a rapid change in the demographics of the area. Since 1990 the Hispanic population has risen 74 percent, from 6.3 percent to 9.1 percent in 1997. Hispanics now make up 12 percent of McMinnville's population.

McMinnville has a long history of providing adult programming, both on its own and partnering with other organizations. It started with the *Let's Talk About It* series through the Oregon State Library years ago, and has used many of the Oregon Council for the Humanities (OCH) Chautauqua programs. McMinnville has received grants from the American Library Association (ALA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to present *Poets in Person* and *Exploring the West... Whose West?*

This past year a citizen planning committee developed a strategic plan for the library. One of the three important Service Responses identified in the plan is Cultural Awareness. An essential component is to reach the under-served Hispanic population of the area. By making the library a welcoming and comfortable place to be, Hispanics can see what the library has to offer and communicate to staff what would be most beneficial to them.

One of our partners in programs and projects is the local campus of Chemeketa Community College (CCC). It offers English as a Second Language classes and houses the local literacy program, formerly housed in the library. In discussions with CCC, we realized that many students complete all of the ESL classes available, but have not had enough experience using English, articulating thoughts, and discussing ideas with others, to continue on to adult basic education classes.

National Connections is a reading and discussion program for adult new readers based on children's literature. It gives participants an opportunity to gather with their peers to discuss timeless themes and to make connections, sometimes for the first time, between books and their own lives. It is modeled on a Vermont program that has enrolled more than 10,000 participants since 1986. The Vermont Council for the Humanities, in partnership with ALA and funded by a grant from the NEH, selected 40 libraries nationwide to participate in the expansion of the program. The Vermont Council and NEH wanted more state humanities councils to try programs that promote the humanities to literacy students.

To apply, McMinnville formed a team including Charma Vaage and Pam Stewart from Chemeketa Community College as literacy members. Both women are enthusiastic library users and supporters. Representing the humanities council was Penny Hummel, then OCH Associate Director. Penny is also active in local, state, and national library issues. Paul Gregorio, the member who served as discussion leader/scholar, teaches juvenile literature in Portland State University's graduate program. Paul is also a librarian and former Education/Outreach person for the Oregon State Library. I served as the representative for the McMinnville Public Library, and coordinated the team. In the past I had worked in children's services, and am currently a member of the local Chemeketa Community College advisory board.

McMinnville was honored to be chosen as the only West Coast library to host a program. The grant provided sets of books for participants to keep, money for a scholar, and a three-day training session in Chicago for four members of the team. Before going, the team discovered significant differences between literacy programs in McMinnville and those in Vermont. Vermont's literacy students are for the most part not ESL students, and their model of literacy training is one on one. In McMinnville ESL students have classroom training, and therefore we had no base of volunteers with whom they were already working. The grant had barely mentioned tutors, assuming our literacy model to be like Vermont's. It was a grant with a very short time line between acceptance and implementation, so the Chicago training session became all the more critical.

In the end, our program was designed to have two series: one in the spring of 1999 and another in the fall of 1999. We tried to select the most universal themes for our anticipated audience, picking *Biographies* for spring and *Friendship* for fall. Each series would have three sessions, one per month, each for two hours. We recruited through the community college, which represented a reliable source of students because their reading levels were known.

At the first session, our discussion leader set people at ease by talking about how one of Lincoln's biographers based part of his account on the contents of Lincoln's

pockets when he died. Paul Gregorio had group members talk about something that they carry with them that might help a biographer understand them. People laughed, felt more comfortable, and realized that they too had stories to tell.

Although the books chosen by Vermont featured people of many ethnic backgrounds, there were no books about Hispanics. We added some poems by Gary Soto, a prominent young Latino writer. His poems reinforce that you don't have to accomplish something great to have your story be of interest to others. Many participants liked the biography theme best because those they learned about had typically struggled to overcome obstacles. In evaluations several people mentioned how these books helped them personally, and made them feel less depressed.

During the spring session we did a lot of adjusting as we learned what worked and what didn't, and we changed several things for the fall series. Working with ESL students meant that our participants were not only reading in another language, and maybe in any language for the first time, but that they were also being called upon to participate in discussions in an unfamiliar language. There were also many concepts or historical personages that were not part of their experience: for example, the Underground Railroad and Eleanor Roosevelt.

We learned that some of the Program's books were at too high a reading level and led to a feeling of failure, rather than one of success and self-esteem. (The Lincoln biography caused an alarming dropout rate.) We learned what a great opportunity the daycare we provided offered. In the fall we enhanced that experience. In addition to having a baby-sitter, a member of the children's staff would do an activity with the kids. It was a wonderful opportunity to let children and their families get comfortable with the library, and to let them know what children's programming and materials we offer, both in English and in Spanish.

Participants arrived late and never wanted to leave at closing, so we started earlier, lengthened the time of the session, skipped breaks and ate as we went. Discussions still continued outside the library at closing! One of our most eager participants, a man in his late 20s studying to be an EMT, had his student visa run out during the session and he was deported to Guatemala. Immigration and Naturalization Services allowed him to stay through the summer to finish up some course work. The student asked when we were starting the fall session, because he wanted to participate so badly. It was too late for him, but he said that if we would give him books, he would write us letters to share his thoughts. Who could resist? We bought an extra set of books for him and indeed, he wrote to us. International connections!

In the fall we also recruited participants through plant nurseries and by word of mouth. This meant some would-be participants were at too low a reading or

conversational level, but we introduced them to the library and referred them to the literacy program. For the *National Connections* fall series we had more tutors in place, allowing us to assign only one or two students to each tutor. This made for some lasting connections, both for tutoring and for friendship.


Because of attrition in the spring session, we invited more than fifteen participants, and only distributed one session's worth of books at a time. Some people who were part of the same household were willing to share sets of books. The fall series had adult new readers from Mexico, Guatemala, Spain, Italy, Poland and Korea, making discussions particularly rich and interesting. When the group seemed too large we spent part of the session in smaller discussion groups. Our team had decided to withhold the book, *Bridge to Terabithia*, because of its advanced reading level. We planned to give it to students at the final session, to read over time. Participants were shocked and indignant that we would give them a book without the opportunity to discuss it together! Team members, tutors and adult new readers all agreed to put in the extra time and come back in a month and a half for an extra session. We used oral rather than written evaluations for the fall series, with much greater success.

Through *National Connections* the local literacy program has gained visibility, added new clients, new tutors, and a further familiarity with the library's resources. The Oregon Council for the Humanities is currently evaluating various literacy programs. Portland State University, through Paul Gregorio's position on the faculty of the Literacy Education Program in the Graduate School of Education, has gained experience and insights into training educators to work with diverse populations in Oregon. Both Gregorio and McMinnville Public Library would like to see a *National Connections*-type program with some changes to better serve our state's needs.

The McMinnville Public Library has gained enthusiastic new patrons and supporters! Our new readers now use the library for children's programs, recreational and how-to reading, and job searching. One woman was so excited that she brings friends to see what they have been missing. The library has a better understanding of the under-served Hispanic population in the county and has built some important bridges with this community. We have been asked by other agencies to be a part of their planning for the future with regard to the changing demographics of our area. I learned much that will help with future programming and with materials selection for the Spanish language collection, and I learned just how much I don't know! The team's poster presentation has been accepted for ALA's poster session on diversity, and Anne Van Sickle, director of McMinnville Public Library and OLA president-elect, along with Paul Gregorio, will be presenting it at ALA this summer in Chicago.

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door, but while I sat in the library van and waited for them to return, the kids came flocking up to get their new library books. I ended up just opening the side door of the van and checking out books right there on the sidewalk. Fortunately, it was one of those rare rain-free days on the coast. The kids were so excited to check out library books. The kids and I now have a good rapport, and there are no longer any behavior problems. Sometimes the teenage girls check out books

and *TEEN* magazines and leave; other times they stay and we take turns reading to each other. When it's cold and raining, the ones who are locked out of their homes stay and read quietly. The Ridge has become a pleasant place to spend a Wednesday afternoon, and I look forward to it now. And to think it all began with a fill-in-the-blank *Ready-to-Read* grant! 

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And what did new readers gain? Positive reading and discussion experiences, books to keep and share with family or friends, an introduction to the library and what it can provide, an excitement about education that has some of them searching out new educational opportunities, and the pleasure of reading and the humanities as lifelong joys. Participants, when asked in the final evaluations what they would choose if they could add one thing to the program, replied: to have more people come, to have more time for discussions, to have more sessions... and to have it not end!

If you would like more information on *National Connections* or would be interested in continuing to share ideas, experiences, successes and failures about serving the Hispanic community with other Oregon libraries please contact me at the McMinnville Public Library at (503) 435-5551 or by email at goldmad@ci.mcminnville.or.us. 

Thinking Locally

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A Resource Shelf

The following items are readily available in many large library reference sections or through inter-library loan for short periods of time for in-library use only. If you can manage the cost, I would recommend acquiring those texts marked with an *. I have included a few online resources to get your research started as well.

Cyberlibrary: *Grants and Fundraising*. <http://www.lscg.cc.fl.us/library/cygra.htm/>

The Foundation Center, <http://www.fdncenter.org/>

Hall, Mary, *Getting Funded: a Complete Guide to Proposal Writing, 3rd Edition*,* 0-87678-070-2. Continuing Education Publications, Portland State University.

LibraryLand, *Administration: Grants, Budgeting, Fundraising*, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/LibraryLand/admin/bud.htm>

Miner, Lynn and Griffith, Jerry, *Proposal Planning and Writing*, 0-89774-726-7. Oryx Press, 1993

1999 Oregon Foundation Databook, McPherson, Craig, Ed., C & D Publishing, Portland, OR 97205, <http://www.foundationdatabook.com>

Winning Grant Proposals, Frost, Gordon, Ed., 0-930807-36-7. Fundraising Institute, Rockville, MD 20852