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Lafayette Library's Successful First Year

By Cathy Tyson



Youthful Lafayette Library and Learning Center users gather at the main entrance and indicate the facility is not only number one, but also one year old. Photo Doug Kohen

this is "their" library - they have ownership."

The LLLC has a close working relationship with the Foundation, a non-profit entity created to support the construction, operations, programming and funding of the LLLC. Many residents don't know that the Foundation is responsible for funding 52% of the annual operating costs - which translates into expanded library hours, funding Glenn Seaborg Learning Consortium programming and maintenance.

As part of the negotiations to get the library built, the City of Lafayette agreed to fund only the amount that they had already been paying for the original library - forever. Of course the new 30,000 square foot, state of the art library is considerably more expensive to run than the old library - that's where the Foundation fits in. The Contra Costa County library system only funds staffing for 35 hours per week, the Foundation funds the balance of the 56 hours per week that the library is open plus the revolutionary Glen Seaborg Learning Consortium.

Some pleasant surprises and challenges have greeted both Weaver and Merchant - they credit Facilities Manager Brian Long for keeping the place humming, "None of us expected what it would take to manage a facility."

One unanticipated surprise was the volume of computer users. The new building has one of the biggest bandwidths in the County library system - but there were so many users logged on to the free wi-fi at one time they had to upgrade capacity.

According to Weaver, another big change is the Friends of the Library. They went from a cramped room in the Lafayette Community Center to a spacious organized facility at the corner of First Street and Golden Gate Way, the Friends Corner Book Shop, and from thirty volunteers to over a hundred.

"Could we deliver an audience," was a concern of Merchant, of the first of its kind in the nation Glenn Seaborg Learning Consortium - a partnership of a dozen Bay Area exemplary science, education and arts institutions. Management and administration of the Consortium is handled by the Foundation. Lamorinda residents are able to enjoy a wide array of events, courtesy of support from the Thomas J. Long Foundation, from California Shakespeare Theater and the Lawrence Hall of Science to the Oakland Zoo and the Commonwealth Club.

Merchant describes their first efforts at getting the word out as "gorilla marketing." In the ensuing months there has been a phenomenal response from the community. Just recently 550 people attended the Lamorinda Reads author event with Abraham Verghese discussing his hugely popular book, "Cutting for Stone." Look for a regularly updated monthly calendar of events available online and on site.

The Foundation's Open Doors Open Minds is very close to its goal amount of \$4 million, helped along by substantial corporate and foundation funding. For example, a generous foundation grant from Bechtel in collaboration with the Foundation and schools

It's hard to believe the Lafayette Library and Learning Center (LLLC) has been open for an entire year. While the old shoe box library on Moraga Road collects dust, on most days 1,000 patrons - sometimes as many as 1,300 people per day stream through the glass double doors to enjoy the spectacular, user-friendly "community living room."

A plethora of books, magazines, audio materials, computers, homework help, comfy chairs and a food-friendly policy invite users to come and stay a while. Any given day will find seniors hanging out, little ones excited for story time and a chance to use the automated materials handling system "all by myself," along with adults settling in with a laptop, cell phone and papers galore.

Library Manager Susan Weaver explains, "The new library is surprisingly different than the old library on so many levels." She said this is due in part to the physicality of the place, room to accommodate many more people, the wi-fi, the homework center. "I think we have the best library in the world. It's worked out better than we anticipated - I love that people camp out here."

Kathy Merchant, President of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation Trustees (Foundation) adds, "The Library brought the community together like nothing else could. Residents feel that

supports a prototype model of a curriculum unit that can be replicated and is portable. NASA photos from outer space are the focus of the premier lesson. The plan is to have a "curriculum in a box" that fits in with existing science units to make life easier for teachers with enrichment materials and lesson plans.

Because part of the new library's mission is to assist underserved communities, the NASA exhibit and teacher curriculum boxes will travel to the Antioch Library and schools in the area. "This fits perfectly with our mission," said Weaver, "Libraries are the great equalizer."

In a nutshell, the County runs the library, the City owns the building and the Foundation takes care of Consortium programming, operations and fundraising. Don't forget the Bookmark Caf• the Historical Society and the Friends Corner Book Shop - also components of the LLLC. In the library's inaugural year there has been a 300% increase in the number of users; my guess is there is 300% more to love at the new facility.

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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