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LLLC reopens doors thanks to foundation efforts

By Diane Claytor



Author Erik Larson presenting his book, "Dead Wake," to the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation audience several years ago. Photo provided

Libraries are once again open for browsing and checking out books. They may look a little different, Beth Needle, executive director of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation (LLLCF) reports. Chairs have been removed, computer stations have been placed further apart and, for now, there are no in-person story times or programs. "But," Needle says, "you can once again talk to a librarian and look for books you want to read."

The LLLCF was established to ensure that the Lafayette Library remains a vibrant resource for the local community, providing funding for programs and, according to Sarah Blumenfeld, LLLCF's development and programs director, helping to keep the lights on and the doors open. "The Foundation contributes 52% of the library's annual budget," she notes, while the county contributes 34%. When the library is open, the county provides 35 hours of open library time per week; LLLCF funding adds another 19 open hours every week.

The Foundation has raised money to update the old computer lab, expanding it into a multi-purpose tech lab which, Blumenfeld says, is more of a STEAM lab than a fixed computer station room, complete with a 3-D printer. LLLCF has also updated and enlarged the children's area of the library.

Pre-pandemic, the Lafayette library hosted close to 1,000 programs a year, attracting more than 35,000 people. By reinventing themselves during the past year with the introduction of the County's Front Door Service, an average of 10,000 items were checked out every month from just the Lafayette library and "demand for online materials increased about 400%," Blumenfeld reports. "Libraries have remained relevant because of

the programming they're doing.

"Before COVID, many of our programs would fill the Community Hall, which holds 200 people. During COVID, we've actually attracted up to 500 people via Zoom to some of our programs," Blumenfeld happily states. "The library promotes lifelong learning," Needle adds. "We try to bring interesting and enriching programs, most of which are free, to Lafayette. Things you may not expect to happen in a small town library because we've always been a small town library that thinks really big."

The popular Distinguished Speaker series has continued throughout the past year via Zoom. Until further notice, this program will continue to be virtual with Joyce Carol Oates and the winner of the fifth annual Joyce Carol Oates prize appearing on May 5.

One of the programs Blumenfeld is most proud of is bringing children's authors into the Lafayette schools. "With so much social unrest last summer, community groups were creating equity, diversity and inclusion programs," she describes. "In partnership with the city, we've been bringing in guest authors to provide a virtual story time to our elementary students." She notes that they look for books "about unsung heroes, people who have done amazing things so we can introduce children to this new history. Teachers and school librarians have been thrilled to have these enriching programs brought to their virtual classrooms."

There have already been six or seven of these presentations and each author has done a story time for the kids. The LLLCF donates a copy of each book to all four elementary schools as well as a copy to the Lafayette library.

Jeff Gottesfeld, author of "Twenty-One Steps: Guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier," was the most recent guest author, reading his book to almost 250 fifth-graders earlier this month. (Gottesfeld is also virtually presenting this incredible book through the Distinguished Speaker program on May 20.) Blumenfeld was so excited to bring this book, with its strong civic message, to the students and Gottesfeld reports that the reception from the kids was great. "I was supposed to talk for about 50 minutes but even after the bell rang, approximately 40 kids stayed online to ask more questions."

For more information on the LLC and its programs, or to donate, go to LLCF.org.

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