

## Public libraries remain very vital in digital age

By Dwight McInvaill, Director, Georgetown County Library, South Carolina, 9-9-2013

Occasionally, I have heard public libraries compared to record stores – something on the verge of becoming increasingly irrelevant and ultimately extinct. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The strong vitality of public libraries in our modern age was succinctly summarized recently in *Forbes*: “They are dynamic, versatile community centers. They welcomed more than 1.59 billion visitors in 2009 and lent books 2.4 billion times – more than 8 times for each citizen. More than half of young adults and seniors living in poverty in the United States used public libraries to access the Internet. They used this access among other purposes to ‘find work, apply to college, secure government benefits, and learn about critical medical treatments.’ For all this, public libraries cost just \$42 per citizen each year to maintain” (David Vinjamuri, [Why Public Libraries Matter: And How They Can Do More](#), *Forbes*, 1/16/2013).

Even more granular detail on the vibrancy of public libraries in the United States was provided this year by The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project in three groundbreaking national survey-based studies entitled [Library Services in the Digital Age](#) (1/22/2013), [Parents, Children, Libraries, and Reading](#) (5/1/13), and [Younger American’s Library Habits and Expectations](#) (6/25/13). Findings included these facts:

- Book borrowing was for 80% of surveyed persons a very-significant library service.
- Reference service was viewed by 80% of these individuals as a quite-important provision in libraries.
- Free public-computer access was underscored by 77% of the people as exceedingly desirable in libraries.
- Preschool-literacy achievements of libraries were highly valued by 94% of parents with 84% underscoring that “libraries help inculcate their children’s love of reading and books” and 81% saying that libraries are crucial because they provide “children with information and resources not available at home.”

As for the next generation (younger Americans ages 16-29), the Pew Research Center’s findings might be astounding to some doubters of public libraries’ ongoing dynamic nature: “As with other age groups, younger Americans were significantly more likely to have read an e-book during 2012 than a year earlier: Among all those ages 16-29, 19% read an e-book during 2011, while 25% did so in 2012. At the same time, however, print reading among younger Americans has remained steady: When asked if they had read at least one print book in the past year, the same proportion (75%) of Americans under age 30 said they had both in 2011 and in 2012. In fact, younger Americans under age 30 are now significantly more likely than older adults to have read a book in print in the past year (75% of all Americans ages 16-29 say this, compared with 64% of those ages 30 and older). And more than eight to ten (85%) older teens ages 16-17 read a print book in the past year, making them significantly more likely to have done so than any other age group.” As of November 2012, 65% of young Americans had a library card; 86% of those age 30 or under had visited a library facility in person; and 58% had frequented a library in the past year.

Public libraries remain really strong, and the Georgetown County Library of South Carolina is a great case in point! While the recession hit our public library hard – with cuts to annual technology and book budgets reducing support from \$160,000 to just \$100,000 from 2008 to 2013, new patron registrations have remained vibrant at over 3,000 new borrowers registered yearly. In a service area of 60,000 residents, our public library has had about 50,000 persons checking out materials annually. Public-program attendance every 12 months regularly exceeds 35,000 to 40,000 individuals. During the depths of the recession, circulation of books and other materials increased from 167,217 in 2008 to 181,930 in 2010. And in 2012, usage of our public-access computers by locals and visitors reached a new high of 70,547 persons.

While individual library records are kept strictly confidential according to state law, we do track nevertheless the general nature of public-access computer utilization patterns by the hour. In the course of the year from July

1, 2012 to June 30, 2013, here's what we learned: Out of 171,516 sessions, only 3,673 directly involved Facebook. 13,620 were related to usage of content-production software ranging from such products as Microsoft Word, Excel, and Power Point. 4,975 were focused specifically on job searches. Much of the rest of the statistical balance was due to news-media searches and general usage of web browsers. Folks here have come to their public library not only to play but also to work.

As noted this summer in National Public Radio's special 8-part series entitled "Keys to the Whole World: American Public Libraries" (<http://www.npr.org/series/209598179/public-libraries-in-america>), modern U.S. public libraries are creative places, veritable incubators of ideas on better serving the literacy needs of our citizenry. Such current public-library innovations have encompassed a broad spectrum ranging from the new Digital Commons at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, DC, to improved natural-disaster responsiveness in New York area public libraries for victims of Hurricane Sandy.

With roots in an exclusive library founded in January 1799 for the local rice-planting and merchant elite, the Georgetown County Library has also seen much change during its almost 215-year history. For its innovative work during the last decade alone, this South Carolina public library received in 2006 the "National Health Information Award for Libraries – Grand Prize;" in 2007, the "National Medal for Library Service" from the Institute of Museum and Library Services; and in 2011, the "ICMA Library Innovation Award" from the International City-County Management Association. A glance now at the Georgetown County Library's information-filled website (<http://georgetowncountylibrary.sc.gov>) shows a plethora of dynamic programming ranging from "Senior Scholars," to "Money Rocks," to "Heritage Center Art Exhibition," to "Birding the Waccamaw," to "Kids Programs," and more! There's also a link to our Georgetown County Digital Library (<http://www.gcdigital.org/>) – with over 30,000 images and documents – used worldwide by over 144,000 persons per month!

During 2012, the Georgetown County Library used grant funding for a couple of important projects touching lives at both ends of the generational range: One effort focused on the creation of our Small Business Center to promote commercial success for entrepreneurs and for job seekers with a special web portal, a small-business collection of 1,660 books, eight workshops on small-business issues, video interviews of 12 local successful small-business owners, four video public-service announcements featuring kids and teens, a large job fair, and a traveling small-business exhibit. Another 2012 effort involved the provision of Early Childhood Literacy Center materials in branches throughout the entire county. In 2013, we are employing grant funds to promote basic financial literacy amongst our county's neediest citizens. We are also embarking on a special endeavor called "Sacred Accounts" to digitize the records of the 12 Churches of the Georgetown City Historic District.

The face of public libraries may be changing across America, but clearly, they remain enormously vital and relevant parts of the communities they serve, and they certainly aren't going the way of record stores any time soon!