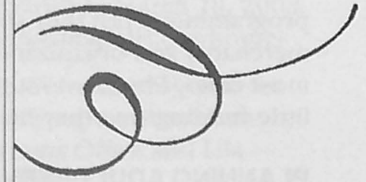


ADULT CULTURAL PROGRAMMING IN SMALL TOWN LIBRARIES

by Rebecca Hill



Library programming for adults is no longer reliant on a good browse of the shelves. Now adults come to the library to discuss books, hear authors speak, listen to live music, and to attend lectures and exhibits. In most communities, the library has been transformed into a cultural center by bringing a variety of programming to all age groups.

According to a recent study on adults and libraries, a 1999 study conducted by the Public Programs Office of the American Libraries Association, eight out of ten adults come to the library for cultural programming (Wilcox). This is even truer in small towns where libraries are often the main source of entertainment for the community. Fulfilling this expectation can be a challenge for an adult services programming budget that is often non-existent. How do smaller libraries find the money for the kind of programming that adults often want?

Discussing these questions with the heads of adult services programming in four small town libraries revealed that not only is adult programming alive and well, but it is creatively funded and planned. Most importantly, all the interviewed librarians attested to the fact that adult programming was an integral factor in the library's overall mission. Librarians who participated in individual interviews included Marilyn Martin from the Zionsville Hussey Mayfield Memorial Public Library, Amie Thomas of the Brownsburg Public Library, Yvonne Welty of the Lebanon Public Library, and Rachel Ziegler of the Plainfield Guilford Township Public Library.

Serving population ranges from 16,000 to 27,000, all four libraries had a full time designated librarian to develop and implement the programming for their adult library populations. To be successful in adult programming, a librarian must consider the following four elements: funding, program planning, collaboration and partnerships, and program marketing and publicity.

FUNDING

All of the librarians interviewed operated their adult services on a shoestring budget of their own

initiative. Adult services programming did not constitute a line item in three of these libraries' annual operating budgets. One library, Plainfield Guilford Township Public Library, had adult service programming as a line item in their annual budget, a \$2000 annual allotment which was used to purchase smaller items such as prizes or refreshments. To compensate, most of these librarians depended solely on funding from their Friends of the Library programs. While most Friends funding originated, either from an annual donation or a periodic request for funds, it wasn't sufficient to cover all programming costs. Another valuable asset is the Library's Foundation which may offer grants that will fund adult programming. As a result, all librarians depended on their own prowess in raising money and generating the much needed funds for these programs.

An important and necessary trait for fundraising was the librarian's willingness to be creative with funding to keep adult programs free or limited to material costs. In the summer of 2007, the Zionsville library offered a total of 53 programs where a speaker or special guest presented the program. Of those 53 programs, over half of the presenters donated their time and talent to the library. A total of 1374 people attended these programs over the summer. Martin solicited merchants, organizations, and individuals for months prior to the summer to fill the program slots that she created. As Martin put it, "Smaller libraries have to try alternative means to raise money."

Because Friends of the Library program funding was limited, some librarians looked to outside funders for the monies that they need. In Lebanon, the library's director writes grants for adult programming. The adult program director, Yvonne Welty, collaborates with local merchants such as Wal-Mart or local organizations such as Psi Iota Psi for materials and books. Marilyn Martin of Zionsville has obtained funding from the county community foundation or the Indiana Arts Commission which makes grants through their regional arts programming.

In addition, competition within the library system can be stiff for this type of funding since children's

summer reading programs often depend on local merchants for their prizes and funding. Librarians were reluctant to “go to the well too often” and risk jeopardizing other library programming as well as their own programming, but they still tried by soliciting local merchants and organizations for in-kind donations. In most cases, librarians interviewed did much with the little funding that they had.

PLANNING ADULT SERVICE PROGRAMMING

The ALA’s study showed that cultural exhibits were the biggest draw in adult programming even though craft programs and reading programs continue to be a staple in adult service programming. The same was found in all the libraries interviewed. But in today’s society, adults are busier than they have ever been. They are shuffling children to after school programs, or working late. They have obligations which often do not leave much time for anything else. As a result, these librarians found that they needed to better understand how to attract the adult market if they wanted their programming to be successful. “I had to realize that I am reaching a crowd that doesn’t always want to commit to a program,” Martin said.

To reach out to adults in their libraries, many of the librarians opted for flexible programming by not requiring advance registration or offering a range of program times. They turned to electronic means for program registration. “The adult audience is the toughest,” said Amie Thomas of Brownsburg Public Library. “We are very cognizant of the busy lives of adults.”

They also sought more information on how to better attract adults to the library. Marilyn Martin focused her program planning with the help of the Arts Council of Indianapolis 2006 study, “Developing Next Generation Arts Audiences” (Arts Council). By using focus groups of under-40 year old “high impact users,” the study determined that patrons who attend cultural and arts events attended for reasons beyond the art itself. They wanted experiences that “fostered learning, connecting, and sensing.” By using this study, Martin was able to more narrowly focus her adult programming to meet these needs. One such program was a Romance of the Libraries author event which included an afternoon tea with an author presentation. On a cold Sunday afternoon, this program enticed over forty adults for an English tea served in china cups and storytelling led by author Madeleine Lefebvre.

Another program which fosters this sense of connection is Lebanon Public Library’s “Taste of Home” monthly program. Each month, 20-24 patrons gather at the library for food and discussion of the items that they have cooked for the event. “It’s an eclectic group that gets along really well,” said Yvonne Welty. Accord-

ing to Welty, this group would never meet under normal circumstances, but for the connection through food which brings them together.

Looking for that intergenerational component has also helped these libraries to attract an array of ages, from senior citizens to young parents to children. At Brownsburg Public Library, a recent music program presented by the Indianapolis Opera Ensemble drew both adults and children. Civil War Reenactment programs presented by Brownsburg and Plainfield groups also drew an intergenerational crowd.

To set up these programs, librarians plan well in advance, sometimes four to six months ahead. They utilize in-house survey results or program evaluations to help plan their programming, thereby focusing efforts on patrons’ needs. Rachel Ziegler of Plainfield uses a spreadsheet to track what ideas work and why. Marilyn Martin gets ideas from magazines, newspaper articles, and Chase’s Calendar of Events. To get her ideas, Amie Thomas converses with her patrons and listens to what they tell her they want to see at the library.

“I watch the trends, see what people are reading and then plan our programs around that information,” Thomas said.

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

For all libraries interviewed, collaboration and partnering with community organizations was a vital aspect to the success of their adult programming. One advantage that these libraries shared was working on the “cusp” of a large metropolitan area, the City of Indianapolis. As a result, access to resources, speakers, and collaborative partners were more readily available than in small rural libraries. According to Martin, the close proximity to major universities is an added plus when looking for speakers on various areas of expertise. For example, the Zionsville library has hosted a Shakespearean scholar from Butler University. In addition, this summer they will be offering science-related lectures with speakers from the University of Indianapolis’ Department of Anthropology and a 3-D TV Virtual Reality Discovery Trip with speakers from Indiana University’s Advanced Visualization Lab.

However, local partnerships and collaborations continue to provide valuable support for adult programming in these small libraries and are considered valuable relationships in meeting the library’s overall mission. According to Thomas, it is not only cost effective, but it helps to build stronger ties within the community.

ADULT PROGRAM MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Whether for adults or children, no program is successful if no one knows about it. Marketing adult program-

ming must be more creative and take into account that today's adult relies heavily on technology to schedule daily living activities. Online program registration and notification was utilized in several of the libraries interviewed. All libraries had an online newsletter which outlined program activities. Lebanon Public Library had a "Fiction Addiction Blog" available to patrons. Since adults are busy, creative marketing of a program is critical if it is to be successful.

The Hussey Mayfield Memorial Public Library held a recent mini-writers conference in collaboration with the Midwest Writers Association. Marilyn Martin publicized the conference in 57 different zip codes, using e-mail blasts, listservs, newsletters, press releases, and other devices and drew a crowd of 162 attendees, the largest and most successful mini conference that Midwest Writers Association ever experienced.

"The library was absolutely thrilled to have had such a sizeable turnout for the Midwest Writers Conference," said Marilyn Martin. "Participants came from all corners of the state (even a few writers from outside the state) to learn new ideas, network and to be re-inspired. This is one of the very few writing conferences offered free to the general public."

Librarians must use more than just publicity to draw a crowd to their programs. Martin also believes that each program must be a "theatrical and thematic event." She focuses on the details to make programs memorable and interesting like a recent visit by a Thomas Jefferson re-enactor to their library. Setting the stage with a hurricane lamp and Jeffersonian artifacts, patrons enjoyed a question and answer session with the former "President." Giving the program an "edge" says Martin, makes it memorable and easier to promote.

Clearly the adult market for library programming is a tough sell. Librarians must now compete with new technology as well as increased constraints on an adult's time. Librarians who recognize the value of collaborative partnerships and creative funding provide better programming even with the challenges that they face in attracting the adult patron to the library. As a result, adults are flocking to the library for more than books. These efforts show an improved circulation as well as an increased number of library cards issued making it true that you need only "get'em in the door."

While computers and computer training, book discussions, adult literacy programming and online databases are still a core resource for many libraries, adult cultural programming appears to be taking on a new lease in the life of a library and its patrons, and will continue to do so as long as librarians seek new and creative ways to reach their adult audience.

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