

Nashville Public Library

2010 National Medal Nomination

Institute of Museum and Library Services

Vision Statement:

Nashville Public Library is committed to:

- *Extending the benefits and joys of reading, lifelong learning, and discovery to all people through collections and services;*
- *Promoting the value and power of knowledge, essential in an informed democracy, by providing open and equal access to the records and opinions of the world;*
- *Providing emerging technologies and instruction as a gateway to information resources within and beyond our walls;*
- *Serving the community with integrity and skill;*
- *Providing an environment welcoming to all people which serves as a gathering place within the community;*
- *Preserving and sharing across generations the wisdom, culture, and history of our community.*

History:

In 1901, Nashville's Howard Library, the successor to a number of reference-only reading rooms dating from 1813, abolished readers' fees and became the city's first free circulating library. The same year, Andrew Carnegie agreed to fund a new library building for the city.

The Carnegie Library opened in downtown Nashville in 1904, followed by three more Carnegie buildings (1915-1919), two of which (North and East Branches) are still in use. In 1934 it was renamed Nashville Public Library.

The Nashville Public Library system now includes the main library, twenty branches, a radio reading service for people with visual and physical disabilities, library services for the deaf and hard of hearing, and the Metropolitan Archives for the city of Nashville.

In 1997, the Metropolitan Council voted to raise property taxes to support an aggressive building and renovation program that included two new regional branches, the replacement of three regional branches (2000-2001), the renovation of two neighborhood branches (2000-2001), and the building of a new 300,000 square-foot main library downtown. The building program culminated with the opening of the new main library, designed by Robert A.M. Stern, in June, 2001.

The building program skyrocketed the library to new prominence and stature as a vital institution in our city. Since the main library and new branches opened, the library's circulation has increased 62%; visits have increased 67%, and the library's public programs for all ages now enjoy an audience of nearly 201,000 attendees annually. In 2004, the library opened a Civil Rights Room to honor the courage of the many Nashville students and citizens who took part in the sit-ins, freedom rides, and other historic actions of the civil rights movement. In 2007, a new Special Collections Center, with a special emphasis on oral and visual history, was opened, and included a yearlong StoryCorps Outpost project in cooperation with NPR. A new Teen Center opened in 2008. Despite budget setbacks, Nashville Public Library has remained full of vitality, with an active Foundation to support special events and projects.

Population groups/communities the library is reaching through its community services and examples of the programs and services that have been developed for these communities. Other organizations within the broader community the library partners with to provide exemplary programs and services. The library's leadership roles in these activities.

Nashville Public Library has 264,958 active cardholders. Because we gather voluntary demographics at the time of patron registration, we know that our cardholder population almost exactly mirrors the racial and ethnic statistics for the entire community—a fact of which we are very proud. The library makes a concerted effort to reach all of its constituency through outreach and public programming on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis. Each of the twenty branches, as well as the main library, has received an extensive demographic report on its environs and populations, broken down into age, income, education level, and ethnic groups, so that staff may serve their clientele in meaningful ways and target new or underserved populations with special programs or outreach activities. Special effort is made to focus on 1) New Americans/Cultural Diversity 2) Children and Teens and 3) Lifelong Learners, especially the technologically challenged.

1) New Americans/Cultural Diversity

Nashville has become an increasingly international and culturally diverse city, with significant Asian, Southeast Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, African, and Eastern European communities. Nashville's foreign-born population more than tripled in size between 1990 and 2000, increasing from 12,662 to 39,596. Nashville has the largest Kurdish community in the United States, numbering approximately 11,000, and was one of only five sites in the United States to take part in the Iraqi elections of 2005. Nashville has become home to a very large international community over the past ten years, including Hispanic, Kurdish, Somali, Eastern European, and Asian immigrants. The library has made a concerted effort to reach out to these groups, as well as to educate the general public about the cultural contributions made to Nashville by new residents.

As the library system develops citywide program themes, each library assesses and queries its own population to determine the most appropriate public programs to offer. The system then moves ahead with a unified theme as diverse as its neighborhoods. One such example is the "Community of Many Faces" month-long program that occurs each November at every library location. This initiative began in 2003 as a way to celebrate cultural diversity. The result is a colorful and ethnically varied package of 208 events (2009) for all ages. November's programs last year garnered 7,288 attendees.

Community partnerships have enabled the library to carry out this special annual program. Friends from every quadrant have helped us plan or have provided programs: the Global Education Center, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Nashville Kurdish Forum, and Chinese Arts Alliance are only a few of the partners who know and help us reach new audiences.

The library also has actively partnered with the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Project Access, an IMLS-funded program targeted to immigrants in Nashville. This unique two-year program combined art, storytelling by the immigrants, and library learning to help immigrants express their stories, improve language skills, and become more familiar with Nashville. Numerous community organizations were involved in the planning for this project, including the United Way, the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute, and Metro Public Schools. Each brought to the table a particular viewpoint on reaching the immigrant audience.

2) Children and Teens

Nashville's 70-year marionette performance tradition has greatly influenced the library's approach to preschool learning readiness. Nearly 6,000 children each month attend the marionette shows and storytimes at the main library alone! In a single year, the library's Puppet Truck, an outreach program for kids and school groups who can't visit the library, gave 325 performances to 23,063 children. The marionette shows, now written and performed by the library's Wishing Chair Productions staff, are serious business for the staff, who understand that children (and adults) learn through many media, including story, song, spoken word, dance, and visual art—all of which are embodied in theatre crafted for children.

This holistic approach to learning, created around our literature-based marionette shows, is brought by the library to at-risk children and their families by the Bringing Books to Life program fully funded in 2005. Bringing Books to Life is a six-step training program for childcare staff, preschoolers, and their families. Teachers, through two in-service sessions, study whole-child learning theories, practice read-aloud techniques, and learn practical ways to incorporate books and story-related activities into their regular classroom routines. The children are treated to a storytime, and their teachers see the teaching techniques they learned in action. The Puppet Truck follows with a performance of the story that has been used for all the lessons. Bringing Books to Life staff also bring a "Loving and Learning" workshop for the families to each agency. The workshops support parents and help them encourage early literacy skills in the home. Families receive books to take home, as well as information about the importance of reading aloud to children. The childcare agency receives not only the curriculum for the story theme that has been used for their program, but membership in an ongoing "curriculum club," so they can receive past and future lessons used by the Bringing Books to Life staff. Last year, Bringing Books to Life served 6,619 children and their families through childcare agencies. Bringing Books to Life is funded through the Nashville Public Library Foundation.

Bringing Books to Life has now expanded with a pilot program for Middle Schools, serving 926 students in its first year of service. The program now partners with Vanderbilt University/Peabody College in its Enhanced Language and Learning program, funded through a U.S. Department of Education Early Reading First grant. In 2009, the Bringing Books to Life program received the American Library Association's Marshall Cavendish Excellence in Library Programming Award.

Nashville Public Library's Young Adult librarians work hard to achieve teen involvement year-round through dynamic after-school programming and four highly participatory systemwide creative contests for teens: filmmaking, logo design, poetry, and songwriting. After-school programs abound, including book groups, "snack attacks," and homework help. Especially notable among our efforts to program specifically for teens is the T.O.T.A.L. (Totally Outstanding Teen Advocates for the Library) program. Fully funded in 2005, this is a group of high school students

employed by the library to plan and implement programs for teens, and to represent the library at community events, meetings, and institutions. Their very successful program repertoire now includes game nights, library scavenger hunts, online safety classes for teens and parents, poetry readings, and seminars on bullying and other social issues. T.O.T.A.L. won the 2007 Highsmith Award of Excellence from the Urban Libraries Council. Nashville Public Library's teen programming relies heavily on community partners, whether it's a recording studio (tour and recording session are first prize in teen songwriting contest) or a film school (tuition to a film class for the winner of the film contest). The T.O.T.A.L. program is itself a partnership, funded through the Nashville Public Library Foundation by a Bank of America Neighborhood Builders grant. They have worked extensively with the YWCA Domestic Abuse Center, Project Ask, Nashville PULSE (youth volunteer corps), the Metro Health Department, the Mayor's Office of Children and Youth, the Mayor's Youth Alliance, Boy Scouts of America, and many area churches and schools.

3) Lifelong Learners

Nashville Public Library has established itself as *the* learning place in Nashville for adults from all walks of life. From African American History Month activities (200 events; 6,959 attendees in 2009) to "Spring Into the Arts" celebrations (this annual six-week program, focusing on dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts, presented 293 events in 2009, and saw 11,770 attendees) to GED classes to formal lectures by local university faculty—the citizens of Nashville have come to count on the public library as a place to expand their knowledge in a wide variety of ways.

Whether it's Vanderbilt University lending faculty for a lunchtime lecture series (350-400 attendees eight times each year), the Frist Center for the Visual Arts holding adult education at the library, Nashville Public Television holding special screenings of its Independent Lens series, or the Nashville Shakespeare Festival holding monthly read-aloud circles, cooperating institutions in Nashville understand the power of doubling up to strengthen themes and audience. Based on our programming success, we were one of 16 libraries chosen to host Aquila Theatre's Page+Stage series, an NEH project that explored the themes of *The Iliad* through reading, stagecraft, and discussion.

Although Nashville was rated #22 nationally as a wired city by Forbes, the need for internet access and public computing at the library has increased dramatically over the past five years. NPL has more than 700 public computers in service, with 516 devoted to internet access and office applications. Our reservation system clocked 945,471 public computer sessions in the library last year. Basic computer classes (Intro to PC, Windows, Searching, E-mail) at the main library are well-attended, with staff teaching 50+ classes each quarter, including specialty classes such as voice over IP, social networking, and browser comparisons. As the economic situation in our city worsened, an increasing number of jobseekers with no internet or computer knowledge began coming to the library for help with online jobsearches and applications. We began opening our classroom at the main library for jobseekers, and stationed knowledgeable staff there to help.

In response to both the need for basic computer education and for jobseeker assistance, we began two mobile computer labs to bring these vital services out into the community. Our mobile teaching lab, active since September 2009, visits branches for a two-week period, offering daily classes in basic computer skills. We also schedule "walk-in" time, for patrons to come get their questions answered, or to learn a specific skill such as how to create a flyer. This lab, purchased with Gates Foundation funds, is staffed through a grant from the Foundation.

A second lab, deployed in October, 2009, addresses the specific computing needs of jobseekers. Stationed at a regional branch, the lab is open each afternoon. There, the jobseeker can learn how to search for a job online, get tips on online job applications, open an e-mail account, or learn how to type a resume. A staff member is on site to offer help. Patrons who use this service often have no idea where to begin, and are extremely grateful to have a helping hand. This program is a partnership between the Nashville Career Advancement Center, who bought the equipment with Federal stimulus funding, and the Library Foundation, who generously pay staff salary.

2. Nashville Public Library's goals for 21st century community service. How these goals reflect the library's mission and strategic plan. How they reflect an assessment of the broader community's learning or informational needs.

In 2008 and 2009, the Library engaged in a conversation with the community called A Strategic Conversation with the Nashville Public Library. Extensive environmental scanning was done at that time, along with careful attention to public opinion. Methods included a web-based survey for users and nonusers; focus groups for book users, computer users, teens, and nonusers; surveys of parents of young children; web and walk-in surveys of library users; 11 town meetings to elicit public input.

Key findings that affect and influence our decision-making process going forward (and thereby set our goals for the 21st century) include:

- The library is an essential component of a livable community. Patrons value their neighborhood branches and want them to remain open. As we plan for possible economic downsizing, we are formulating staffing plans and patterns that keep neighborhood services running.
- People value the library as a civic living room. Public programs and civic discourse were viewed as a vital part of the library's offerings. We commit to maintaining an exciting and informative events schedule.
- Books and materials continue to be the primary motivation for library use. We commit to high quality collections, constant monitoring of collection and usage trends, and making bold choices for the public good in order to maximize our resources.
- People are not aware of the depth of current library services and programs. We commit to educating the public about how to find and use our services.
- Service to children and teens is seen as highly important. Exciting library services for children and teens remains a priority for Nashville Public Library, along with school and public library cooperative programs.
- Library users are technologically savvy. We steer resources toward staying on the cutting edge of technological advances, and commit to using new and developing web techniques for delivering information.
- The library plays an essential role in bridging the digital divide. We commit to maintaining free access to internet service and computer applications for all citizens without access. Vital to this commitment is the teaching of basic computer skills and the sharing of knowledge about each new technology we offer.

Impact of programs and services on addressing community issues. Meeting the needs of audiences.

Nashville Public Library assesses its collections, services and programs in a number of ways. Using benchmark statistics, it surveys not only program attendees, but samples library patrons throughout the system for their responses to a wide variety of issues, from satisfaction with library materials to services received to ease of use to relevance. Computer class attendees are surveyed to ensure quality learning experiences. A great deal of empirical data is gathered to make sure the library is on the mark in terms of attendance at, and quality of, programs and services. Staff committees (children's, teen, and adult librarians) both review past programs and propose new initiatives, along with both systemwide and main library programming committees.

Of deep concern to Nashvillians right now is the improvement of our public school system. The theme of cooperation between public and school libraries came up repeatedly in our Strategic Conversation in almost all groups. In 2009, Nashville Mayor Karl Dean approached Nashville Public Library to spearhead an effort to improve school libraries. After months of planning and conversation with the schools, we are launching a pilot program with three high schools to manage their collection development and purchasing of new materials. Reciprocal borrowing has been arranged for students through Project Athena, a consortium of public and university libraries in the area. Extended borrowing privileges will be given to teachers and school librarians at pilot schools, and delivery of materials to students at their schools will make obtaining materials easier for them. A special electronic library of 400 curriculum-enhancing titles has been set up by Ingram Digital for use by students, and the library is developing a web portal for the schools, to give easy access to relevant online collections owned by the public library. The issue of quality schools is a serious one for Nashville, and Nashville Public Library is proud to have a major role in working toward a solution. The project, called "Limitless Libraries," will be evaluated in June 2010 with the goal of expansion to additional high schools. We believe it is the first project of its kind in the nation.

Sustenance of these commitments to the community.

In the current economic environment, each new initiative is studied for its relevance to the library's mission, as well as its fiscal feasibility and maintenance requirements. Commitments are not made lightly: Nashville Public Library does everything it can to sustain its efforts. Many new ventures are begun and sustained by the Nashville Public Library Foundation (T.O.T.A.L., Bringing Books to Life, mobile computer labs). These ventures are evaluated annually for effectiveness and continue to be supported by the Foundation.

In recent months, the library has revamped its already strong volunteer program (528 volunteers throughout library system, including the Talking Library, whose 130 volunteers read books, magazines, and newspapers via radio), adding a Foundation-funded staff member to reach out to and train student volunteers from the thirteen colleges and universities in the city. Volunteers help us in almost all of our endeavors, from shelving books to hosting at special programs, to wrangling children at crowded Saturday puppet shows.

And because the administration and staff of the library know that relationships with other community organizations and institutions can improve the quality of existing programs and open doors to new and creative programs, the entire library goes far to foster partnerships among institutions that will enhance and sustain our efforts.

How our institution has reached beyond U.S. borders to advance cultural understanding in the U.S. and abroad.

Nashville Public Library puts tremendous effort behind cultural understanding and openness. In addition to its Community of Many Faces programs, we have worked to bring significant international art exhibits to our galleries, including New Visions/New Voices: the Work of Nashville's Hispanic Artists; A Moment of Eternity: The Poetry/Calligraphy of Huang Xiang; Exploring the Great Outdoors: International Illustrations from Children's Books; Ancient Threads, Newly Woven: Recent Art from China's Silk Road.

Friends of the Library host an annual classical guitar series to bring the premier guitarists of the world to Nashville. To date, the program has hosted guitarists from Finland, Italy, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, Spain, Croatia, Mexico and Norway. Nashville's musicians and music students have gained much from these players, who also hold master classes while they are visiting.

But perhaps the most remarkable achievement has come out of our world-class marionette and puppetry arts program, Wishing Chair Productions. For many years, the creative staff and puppeteers have been mounting shows that reflect the storytelling traditions and cultures of our increasingly diverse city, focusing on folktales indigenous to a particular culture (African, Mexican, Native American, Asian, Middle Eastern). Staff and members of each community carefully research dialogue, costuming, and historical accuracy. Productions also try to incorporate the puppetry arts of the culture. The shows have received a warm and appreciative reception, both from the ethnic community and the general public.

When the mayor of Nashville's sister city, Magdeburg, Germany came to visit in 2003, he was delighted to learn of our puppetry program. Magdeburg is the home of one of Europe's oldest and most well-respected puppet theaters. In 2004, during a week-long Sister Cities celebration of Magdeburg, the German city sent more than 100 puppets and its exhibit designers to fill the library's lobby with a spectacular exhibit, and sent its puppeteers and stagesets to perform at the library for the week. It wasn't long before our team leader for Wishing Chair Productions visited Magdeburg, learning all he could about European puppet traditions. In Europe, he met the puppeteers of many countries, bringing back techniques to broaden the scope of the library's productions. Upon his return, the idea of Nashville Public Library hosting an international puppet festival was born.

The first Nashville Puppet Festival was held June 20 – 22, 2008. Financed by the Nashville Public Library Foundation, it brought troupes from all over the world to perform: Dragon Art Studio (China), Philip Huber (U.S.), Magdeburg Puppentheater (Germany), Teatro dei Burattini San Carlino (Italy), Velo Theatre (France), Wood and Strings Theatre (U.S), and our own Wishing Chair Productions dazzled more than 15,000 children and adults over the weekend. Perhaps the most exciting part of the event was seeing the very different styles and puppetry traditions from other nations, a true lesson in cultural understanding for Nashville. Plans are underway for the next festival, to be held in 2011.

Incidentally, our friends from Magdeburg were back this fall. They (and we) see a very strong connection between the American civil rights movement and the struggles of a nation to reunite. They brought with them an exhibit about the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. The exhibit stood in our Civil Rights Room.