

Library offers much more than just books

It's a service that often flies under the radar – with few people realizing its many elements fulfill the educational, recreational and social needs of thousands of Kitchener residents on a daily basis.

In fact, 3,400 people visit at least one of its different locations across the community each day – making it one of the city's busiest resources.

Yet, there's a common perception in the community that its popularity is passé... that the ever-expanding world of technology has lessened its worth.

That couldn't be farther from the truth, says Sonia Lewis, chief executive officer of the Kitchener Public Library (KPL) system.

"The KPL is still one of the most heavily used city services," she said. "More than half of Kitchener's residents are library-card holders; and in 2007, more than two million items were checked out of our libraries across the city."

By items, Lewis means everything from books and reports to CDs and DVDs.

"We offer a lot more than just books," she said. "While books are still very important and in high demand, we also offer efficient electronic services to help people find the information they need; a skilled staff who are always willing to assist visitors who may not know how to use some of our services; and a variety of programs – something for every age level."

Perhaps the best service of all is that no resident has to travel very far to enjoy the local library's amenities.

Community libraries

Based on the layout of its service model, Kitchener's library system is made up of one central library that supports neighbourhood branches – or community libraries, as they are often called – in virtually every end of the city.

In addition to the main library, which serves Kitchener's central neighbourhoods residents and more, branch libraries are also located in Forest Heights, Stanley Park, Pioneer Park and Country Hills.

"Our service model dictates that we should have one community library in every neighbourhood that's seeing a lot of growth," Lewis said.

And as the city grows, so are the sizes of those branches.

The youngest of the community libraries, the Country Hills branch, which is located at St. Mary's high school, is the city's largest at more than 14,000 square feet in size.

This branch is the result of a partnership between the KPL and the Waterloo Catholic District School Board – a similar agreement to the one the KPL has with the Waterloo Region District School Board in its operation of the Grand River Stanley Park community library out of Grand River Collegiate Institute.

"And going forward, we see the sizes of our community libraries only getting bigger – especially in terms of services and collections," Lewis said.

In fact, opening a new community library in the city's ever-growing south-west end is in the KPL's capital forecast for 2015-2016; and the library board is now in informal discussions with other organizations to see if partnership opportunities are possible.

"We would love to be part of a complex in the south-west end – something like a community centre would be great," Lewis said.

"We are seeing tremendous population growth in that area of the city, and we need to respond to it."

"Having a good branch-library structure to support each community is essential," added Dan Carli, chair of the KPL board.

"The branches we open are very much suited to the community they're located in – and the patrons who use them."

Diverse materials

Given Kitchener is such a multi-cultural community, the KPL has tried to bring different parts of the world to its shelves.

The library carries daily newspapers from around the globe. Some are in foreign languages, reflective of the languages that are most spoken in Kitchener.

"It's nice for people who may come from another place to be able to come and read up-to-date information on what's going on where they're from," Carli said.

Lewis added that the KPL actually carries books in 26 different languages – on top of English and French.

"And we anticipate our collection will continue to grow as the community grows," she said.

"People seem to really enjoy that aspect of our service. They're delighted to find materials for adults and children – books, DVDs and more – in their own languages."

The challenge, however, is that so many new Canadians in the community still don't know that these resources are available to them through the library.

"We are always working with community groups and the K-W Multicultural Centre to spread the word, but we find it tough to get the message out that we have these services to offer," Sonia said.

Modern technology

The library's diverse materials are not the only part of its collection that often goes unnoticed.

Lewis said a lot of people still don't realize that the library is a wealth of technological resources – computer workstations that are no longer used solely for looking up the location of a particular book on a shelf.

Today the library offers 105 computer workstations across its system; 79 of those have Internet access, allowing library users who don't have access to the web at home to look up and gather the information they need.

"Our computer labs are always full," Lewis said. "A lot of people who visit the library come to access the Internet."

"And if they need help in doing so, our staff is always right there to lend a hand and provide assistance."

Often times, Lewis said, the people who are interested in Internet technology are also interested in the other contemporary learning tools the library has to offer, such as CDs and DVDs.

"We've seen big increases in demand for CDs and DVDs," she said. "They're especially great for training purposes. A lot of people prefer audio-visual instruction; it's a great way to learn."

As is having the ability to download audio books to an MP3 player – a service the library introduced to its users more than a year ago.

"We anticipate that other information will also be available for downloading in the future," Lewis said. "It's possible that one day we'll be able to offer downloadable music, videos and other information like that."

But the library's services – and technological advancements – aren't confined to the four walls of its facilities.

Library users with personal Internet access can log on to the library's online catalogue, which enables the user to search for books and other reading materials, place holds and request automatic notifications from the library when a certain item is in stock.

There is no charge to use any service on the website.

"Our virtual service provides library users with access to our information 24 hours a day, seven days a week," Lewis said.

Carli – who is a regular visitor to the KPL's website – said he especially appreciates a user's ability to access a number of journals under various categories – business, consumer, health and recreation to name a few.

"We have a cooperative agreement with public libraries across the province that enables us to pay a reduced fee and subscribe to these publications," Lewis explained. "It's a wonderful arrangement that we know many of our users value."

The library also produces electronic newsletters, informing subscribers of new materials that have or will be arriving at the library that may match their interests.

"For example, if you're interested in children's fiction, we have an entire electronic newsletter devoted to the subject," Lewis said. "It's a great way for people to stay up to date."

Carli acknowledged there's still an ongoing perception that technology has made most of what the library has to offer irrelevant.

"The reverse is obviously true," he said. "We've adopted technology. It has made us more efficient; and it has allowed us to provide a variety of services and more up-to-date information to library users."

"Technology is simply a tool," Lewis said. "The role the library plays in the community outweighs the importance of any piece of technology."

Great equalizer

Carli said the library is often overlooked as a fundamental community service – despite all of the resources it offers its patrons.

"A friend and I were having this conversation recently, and he pointed out how sports programs or all kinds are pumped up by so many people; yet everyone seems to forget about the library," he said. "Meanwhile, only one per cent of the people who play hockey go on to make the NHL; 100 per cent need to be literate."

"People need to be literate to succeed," added Lewis. "And we're helping to build those skills."

Lewis always enjoys seeing parents – and grandparents – bring young children to the library and help them with their reading skills.

"It's great for their (children's) social development as well," she said. "We have so many programs – including children's storytime – that help foster an early love for reading in children; and it allows them to interact with others their age in a safe, fun environment."

"It's a role that's often overlooked."

In all, the library is a gathering place for the community – a hub of activity where families can bond, friends can meet and individuals can enjoy some quiet time.

"It's a gathering place for many people," Carli said in describing the library. "And the best part is anyone – no matter who you are – can come and enjoy its services."

Everyone in the Waterloo region can now get a free KPL card. Library membership is no longer limited to Kitchener residents.

"I always refer to the library as the great equalizer; it levels the playing field for everyone in the community," Carli said. "We all have access to the same information."

Dynamic future

Given the library's universal usefulness and appeal, many people are changing their perception of the facility.

"There are still some people who still equate the library with books only, and they see it as a place their grandparents like to go," Lewis said. "But that's just not the case."

"We offer something for everyone – no matter who you are or how old you are."

For example, the library recently hosted a Nintendo Wii tournament for youth.

"Our research has told us that gaming does help with reading and literacy skills," Lewis said. "It proved to be an extraordinary way to draw teenagers through our doors; and when they were here, they got to see what else we have to offer and interact with others their age."

Other efforts – such as organizing community outreach work, which sees library volunteers deliver books to shut-ins and staff make presentations at local schools; promoting the work of local artists; providing contest opportunities for young writers; and offering interesting speaker series and film viewings – continue to highlight the facility's services to the community.

"There's no question that the library contributes to the quality of life in Kitchener; and more and more people are realizing what we bring to the table," Lewis said.

"You won't find anyone 'shushing' you here – something many people still associate with libraries."

"We are encouraging people to come here, have fun and enjoy themselves. That's what makes us the dynamic, lively environment that we are."



Sonia Lewis, chief executive officer of the Kitchener Public Library (KPL) and Dan Carli, chair of the KPL board, look up information on one of the library's many computer terminals.

