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What Did We Learn?

Youth and Family Programs at Deschutes Public Library

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HEATHER MCNEIL has been the Youth Services Manager at Deschutes Public Library for 19 years. She is the recipient of OLA's 2014 Librarian of the Year and the 2017 Evelyn Sibley Lampman Award, and she served on the 2005 Newbery and 2018 Caldecott Committees. She says that the best part of her week is Toddlin' Tales, when she sings, reads, and acts silly with a room full of curious and adorable toddlers. Heather lives in Bend with two very weird cats and looks forward to visits from her daughter, who is at Pacific Lutheran University. She just finished reading *Wild Beauty* by Anna-Marie McLemore and thought it was absolutely gorgeous!

A four-year-old in a sparkly dress and tiara. Patrons loudly hammering on leather strips. Sleepy faces peering up from sleeping bags. Teens geeking out over Sherlock and anime characters. Llamas peeing on the carpet.

Wait. What? Llamas in the library? Surely not. Who would bring llamas in the library?

That would be me. And it's just one of the many things I've learned over the years about youth programs, good, bad, and ugly. Let's start with the good.

Probably number one on the adorable scale is our annual *Royal Tea Party*. We invite children to dress in their finest and have the chance to meet the "Queen." The first year we did this, my mother played that part, and she relished every one of the curtsies and bows she received as the children walked down the royal red carpet. Now we have library staff who volunteer to play the part. After the greeting, everyone sits at linen-covered tables and is served juice, cheese cubes, and cookies. The cutlery is plastic, but the serving dishes are silver and china, donated by library staff for the event. There is brief entertainment: a story at the beginning and gentle recorded harp music in the background during tea. Patrons must pre-register, and we're always full.

What did we learn? Keep everything simple. The first year we did a reader's theater, a read aloud, and a song, but so much entertainment is not necessary. Now we do just one story or a participation song. The children are excited to be dressed up, they totally believe in the Queen, who, along with the librarians, is dressed in Renaissance costume, and they love the fancy tables with flowered centerpieces and linens. They just want to have their picture taken with the Queen and do a lot of twirling. They don't need anything more.

Our annual *How-To Fest* at the Redmond Library brings in a wide variety of activity, with members of the community demonstrating everything from how to get organized to how to garden in the High Desert. Josie Hanneman, the librarian who began this annual event, overheard supportive comments such as, "We drove all the way from Bend to learn





Two adorable llamas leave behind more than expected for enthralled audience members at the Downtown Bend Library. (Photo by Heather McNeil.)

about worms!” and, “We need more of this in our community.” Twenty-six sessions ran simultaneously in and out of the library. Participants learned how to build a trebuchet, how to upgrade a lawn mower into a parade vehicle, and how to use essential oils. Bend’s DIY Cave (www.diycafe.com) taught how to make leather bracelets (thus the loud hammering), and the Youth Empowerment Bike Program taught bike repairs. There were simple crafts available for the young, such as seed bombs and card making. Two of the most popular sessions were on raising honeybees, and another on raising guinea pigs. Squeaking, chirping Lil’ Yeller and Snowburst were the stars!

What did we learn? Have plenty of volunteers helping with directions, supplies, surveys, etc. Everyone who presented volunteered their time, so cost was minimal. The more time spent planning, the smoother everything will go. Plan details that seem insignificant; doing so will help you on the day-of. We did the *How-To Fest* on the first day of summer reading, which definitely brought in attendees but added perhaps too much to the chaos. A champagne problem!

An ongoing challenge for many libraries is how to appeal to teens. What will bring them to the library? Although nothing is guaranteed, we had great success with a *Fandom Halloween Party*. Participants came dressed as their favorite character, enjoyed fandom crafts and trivia, and snacked on fandom-themed food, such as Wookiee Cookies. April Witteveen, teen librarian, heard, “We don’t have any place where we can cosplay, so this is great!”

What did we learn? Stay in tune with pop culture. What series are popular? What are teens binge-watching? Make sure it’s not a “has been.”

We began doing *Overnight at the Library* as part of the summer reading program about ten years ago, and it has become an annual favorite for many families. Registration is required, and we limit it to 40 children, each with at least one parent. Librarians provide a variety of activities and entertainment from 7:30–9:30 p.m., including crafts, games, and storytelling. Every activity involves everyone, not just the kids, which has not been a prob-



lem—any parent who would agree to spend the night on the floor of the library is a pretty involved parent. There are breaks for snacks and quiet time for reading to calm down the energy. At 10:00 p.m., everyone gets into their sleeping bags around the room; flashlights are allowed for more reading. We provide coffee, doughnuts, and juice the next morning, and everyone is out of the building by 9:00 a.m.

What did we learn? There have been parents who wanted to send their child with someone else’s parent, or just drop off their child for the night. We have adhered to our rule, explaining that this is a family-based activity designed to create lasting memories about the library. One of my favorites is the 7-year-old girl who came racing in, threw down her sleeping bag, and yelled, “I’m going to sleep with the fairies!” She staked her claim on the floor below all the Rainbow Fairies books. Her mother smiled and said, “She has been planning this ever since she heard about it at a school assembly.”

La Pine is a rural community, and it’s sometimes tough to get attendance at programs, but the annual *Gingerbread House Workshop* never lacks for popularity. All ages are welcome. We provide the building materials, they provide the creativity. Roxanne Renteria, the librarian, recorded more than 100 participants this year and said, “They all seemed to have fun.”

What did we learn? This is another one that requires help from plenty of volunteers for prep and clean up. Also, be sure to add meringue to the icing recipe, so it dries quickly and holds the graham crackers together.

Chandra VanEijnsbergen, community librarian at the East Bend Library, said that one of her most successful STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math) programs was when she didn’t tell the participants what to do. She simply laid out supplies, some useful,



Family members of all ages work together on gingerbread houses at the La Pine Library. (Photo by Tina Davis.)



some not so much, for building a windmill, but gave no instructions. “I showed them a brief video that showed how windmills work, then I just let them go at it with no help from me, no more explaining or showing them anything, just you figure it out. And they all did! They all came up with working windmills that lifted a weight.”

What did we learn? Chandra says, “Sometimes NOT explaining things to the kids is just as powerful. They can figure it out themselves, and perhaps they even learn more that way.”

Spanish language storytimes were getting sparse attendance at the Redmond Library. We tried renaming the series, to emphasize learning, but that didn’t help. Then Gaby Hernandez, our Latino Services Specialist, made a big change. It became *Leer/Crear/Jugar!* (*Read/ Create/Play*). It meets monthly in the early evening, and the entire family is invited. She offers storytime, crafts, STEM activities, and simple snacks. The result? Great attendance and a strong following!

What did we learn? Consider the audience. Coming to the library during the morning was obviously difficult or unappealing for this population, but family fun at 5:30 was just right.

Have all our programs been this successful? In a word, no. There are times when no one shows up, or, even worse, there’s only one overwhelmed child getting way too much attention. Here are some examples of programs too memorable to forget, though we’d really like to:

- Llamas in the Library was part of a pet-themed summer reading program years ago. The owner of the llamas assured me that they only pee and poop if they smell it from other llamas, so we could bring them inside and putting plastic covers on the floor was not necessary. Programs at the first two libraries went just fine. At the Downtown Bend Library, she brought two adorable, long-lashed llamas who gazed out at the filled-to-capacity room. After about five minutes, while the owner was giving all the best details about her pets, the elder male peed. Which made the younger one pee. Which made the older one poop. Which made ... me ask her to please remove the llamas! She removed one, and the other settled down. The Facilities Department was not happy with me, and for months after, kids would come to storytime in that room and announce, “Mommy, this is where those llamas peed!”
- Speaking of peeing (can’t believe I wrote that), I not-so-fondly remember the parent who, during storytime, whipped out a potty chair from her bag, stood up her toddler, pulled down his pants, and said, “OK, sweetie. Go ahead. You can do it. You’re a big boy ...” And so on. I was gobsmacked and all I could think of was to bring storytime to a halt. Which I did, confusing everyone with the early ending. I approached the mother and said, “Perhaps you didn’t realize there is a bathroom at the back of the room?” To which she replied, “Oh, he doesn’t do well with bathrooms, and this is THE WEEK he gets potty trained.”
- Another STEM program from Chandra focused on building air-powered cars out of empty water bottles and balloons. On the day of the program, she had bottles of hard plastic, rather than the soft plastic she had used as a model. “We couldn’t cut into the bottles to attach wheels and balloons, so we spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to make it work with what we had. I learned to always make your model out of the actual materials you will use in the program!”



- Similarly, I led potato rolling races on St. Patrick's Day, without ever actually practicing rolling the potatoes—with noses. Within less than a minute, three kids had bloody noses. Bad idea!

Every program is a learning experience. Finding the right day, time, topic, format, approach, design—it's not easy. We have to think about the community—transportation issues, rural vs. urban, other competing activities. Deschutes Public Library serves five very different communities, so what works in one might not work in another. We have struggled with getting regular attendance at a Sensory Storytime, but so far have not been able to achieve that. Is it the marketing? The day? The time? The name? All of that is under consideration, plus we talk with others who have established a successful series. We had minimal attendance with one-off after-school programs until we started calling them “camps” that continued for three weeks on subjects such as poetry writing, music or art. Bingo! That made all the difference, and registration is often full.

If a program is less than successful, we assess what could be improved the next time, or whether to let the whole idea go. We “keep on keepin’ on,” because it’s all worth it when we get it right. 🌀



Twirling your tutu is essential at the Royal Tea Party. (Photo by Tina Davis.)



Even superheroes come to the Royal Tea Party. (Photo by Tina Davis.)

