

SMALL LIBRARIES, BIG IMPACT

Revisiting *LJ*'s Best Small Library in America award winners reveals local support, staff enthusiasm, and leadership in the larger library world

By Kristi Chadwick

The Best Small Library in America award was created in 2005 to honor libraries that meet the challenges of smaller budgets, space, technology, and collections and still find ways to bring expanded, innovative, and supportive services to their smaller communities. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for the past decade the award has encouraged and showcased exemplary work in libraries serving populations under 25,000. Judging criteria include creativity in developing model services and programs, innovations in public access computing, demonstrated community support, and evidence of the library's role as community center. This year *LJ* looks back to see how the award has influenced the winning libraries, their communities, and their futures.



2005 Haines Borough Public Library, AK

The inaugural winner, Haines Borough Public Library, was just moving into a new building funded by its small (at the time population around 2,600) community. Susan Elliott, a long-term library professional and mentor to then-director Ann Myren, suggested the library apply “because their programs, services, and philosophy of operations seemed a perfect fit with the award criteria.”

Reba Heaton, currently the assistant director, says, “We were proud of our library before we got the award and were just as proud after.”

Serving a community that is detached from most of its neighbors, accessible only by boat and plane, only increases the effect that a national award can have. Current director Patricia

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Brown notes, “People were proud to be from the town that received the Best Small Library in America 2005. Even today people will refer to the library as ‘the best small library.’”

At its inception, first place winners received \$10,000 in cash from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The library decided to spend the funds on immediate needs, but ones that would still support the sustainability of the library. The funds went toward hiring a library director-in-training who worked with the director for eight months while an in-depth training and transition period took place. Upgrades in technology were made, along with collection development enhancements, and funds were used for HVAC maintenance and offsetting heating fuel.

In the years since, library use continues to grow, with program and meeting attendance over the last two fiscal years topping 10,000 though the service area population has grown only minimally. Haines has also recently begun a capital campaign to expand the library building with an additional meeting room, as well as staff and storage space.

“The recognition affirmed what the community already felt,” library board member JoAnn Ross Cunningham says. “The...library is a dynamic, beautiful, beloved institution, a welcoming and thriving place which supports access to information and a variety of programs and is a major hub in the community. The vitality we...experience at our library is as good as it gets.”



2006 Milanof-Schock Library, PA

“Every library is unique to the community it serves,” states Debra Rosser-Hogben, current director of the 2006 award-winning Milanof-Schock Library (MSL). Started in 1964 by the Girl Scouts as a bookmobile service, then finally funded in part by matched endowments, MSL continues to serve as a community center to its 50 square

mile district within Lancaster County, PA. Herb Landau, who was MSL director in 2006 (he is currently director of the Lancaster Public Library) had few doubts that the library had a shot at the award. “We believed that our library excelled in all the... criteria and we had a good chance of winning.”

Landau says the recognition helped leverage professional development for the staff. “We experienced wide local media coverage, unsolicited foundation gifts, testimonials from government officials, and invitations to speak at both the local and national level. I was even invited to author a book on small library management by the American Library Association.”

Most of the award money went to collection development for adult titles, replacing several children's VHS titles with DVDs, seed funding for expanded programming, and increased hours for the circulation/technical service supervisor to full-time.

In the years since, MSL has continued to cement its role as a community center, providing much-needed meeting space for one of the townships it serves as its temporary town center and as the new polling place. Rosser-Hogben continues, “Our programs and services have expanded over the years... but our greatest asset continues to be our relationship with our patrons.... Sometimes it's the littlest thing that can have the biggest impact on an individual's life.”



2007 Grand County Public Library, UT

Eve Tallman, director of the Grand County Public Library (GCPL) from 2001 to 2007, was encouraged to apply for the Best Small Library in America award by the staff of *LJ*. “We had been developing our programs and infrastructure, including opening our first small branch. After a brief tussle, the board allowed us to offer Internet to

tourists. Then, we won a construction bond election by a large margin in an extremely tax-averse community.... [W]e felt we had an outstanding community-based project to share with the library world.”

Current director Carrie Valdes concurs that the effects of the award still influence the library today. “As our community is a tourist destination, we get visitors who comment on the award...[and] new arrivals who are impressed.” GCPL's award (the prize amount rose to \$15,000 in 2007) went to “buy more computers, of course!” states Tallman. “We may have more computers per capita than just about any other small library in America: about 60 for a county with a population of 9,000.”

Valdes says, “Our library enjoys a tremendous amount of

community support and that has translated into continual funding from the county council. We benefit from an engaged library board and staff buy-in.” That staff support has come full circle: while Tallman left to direct at the Mesa County Libraries in Colorado, after she retired, she came back to GCPL to teach grant-writing classes and work on the circ desk. “I bring armloads of books home, and I get to greet the patrons—something I rarely got to do as director.”



2008 Chelsea District Library, MI

“Since 2008, I've had a number of people say to me that the reason that they chose to move to Chelsea was because of the library,” says Bill Harmer, director of the Chelsea District Library (CDL). Harmer was head of adult services when CDL won the award in 2008 and feels the support of the community

led to the win. “We believed that the residents of Chelsea valued their library because together we brought it to life by inviting public participation and collaborative creation.” Having just built a state-of-the-art facility two years prior, with a bond that just barely passed and underlying skepticism for the need for a new library,” Harmer states, “the timing of the award was crucial.”

Technology was the focus for the award funds in Chelsea. Laptops were purchased for use by youth and adults within the library, expanding access to computers for group projects or outside of regular computer locations. CDL also purchased two AWE (advanced workstations in education) computers, or early literacy stations, designed for children ages two to eight and featuring dozens of software programs spanning a wide array of curricular activities.

Funds also enabled several staffers to attend the Public Library Association meeting that year for the awards ceremony. “Our goal was to share the spotlight with team members whose creativity, expertise, and skill made winning the award possible,” notes Harmer. Harmer as well was selected by the Gates Foundation to attend the 2013 Peer Learning Meeting, a global conference on libraries held in South Africa.

“Libraries build community. These were the magical words that we built our vision on,” notes Harmer. “We remain driven by a deep commitment to lead and by a passion for what the library can become in the community.”



2009 Union County Carnegie Library, SC

“We were working so hard to make the library a wonderful space for all members of our community, that there must be a way to celebrate our successes. I suggested to several staff that we apply for the award...never thinking we had any chance to win,” states Nancy Rosenwald, former director of the Union County Carnegie Library. “Marsha Jordan (Hathcock then), our tech-

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nology specialist, noted that this was the moment to reflect and create a document detailing our successes, something we had not done in our excitement to push forward.... [W]e were astonished to see how far we had come.”

Already going through its own transformation since Rosenwald’s 2005 arrival, the award was the icing on the cake. “I believe that the staff who committed themselves to serving the public well by enhancing services like genealogy, children’s services, additional computing and technology support, and great customer service were extremely proud to win this award,” says Rosenwald. “They already knew that their hard work had been rewarded locally by the numbers of community members utilizing the library on a daily basis.” Current director Ben Loftus agrees. “For many people in the community, the award is one of the only things they know about the library, which is both a positive and a negative—it means their first thought of the library is that it is something to be proud of, but it also means we can educate them on other things the library offers and make them more regular users.”

Rosenwald put the award money toward a tangible item to serve the community: an up-to-date phone system. “Multiple lines, voice mail, and messaging capabilities. We were having such extraordinary responses to our services and programs... we wanted to direct callers to the staff member with whom they wished to speak and answer questions people had during off-hours. A new phone system allowed us to do these things.”

The award also allowed Rosenwald and her staff to do what all libraries want to do: make note of their accomplishments. “By taking the time to document your library’s successes, challenges, and transformative moments as an organization through the [award] process,” says Rosenwald, “you have already won!”



2010 Glen Carbon Centennial Library, IL

“We applied for the award in 2008 and were selected as a runner-up,” states former Glen Carbon Centennial Library (GCCL) director Anne Hughes. That was “a wonderful honor, but the staff wanted to try again for the top spot in 2010. We worked hard over the next two years to improve in the specified focus areas of the application.”

Open seven days a week, Hughes notes the library is fortunate to have stable tax funding and support. This has allowed the library to implement increases in technology, programming, and outreach. “I believe the community always saw the library as a gem,” Hughes comments. “The facility is beautiful, and the service is top-notch. After the award, we heard that realtors used the award as an incentive to buyers when selling homes in the village.”

Hughes, who retired from GCCL in the beginning of April, notes that the Best Small Library in America award was something the entire staff worked very hard to achieve. “It’s the best feeling to be recognized for the work you do.”

2011 Naturita Community Library, CO

When the Naturita Community Library (NCL) opened in 2009, it had already garnered fame as the largest straw bale

library in America. What the staff wanted to ensure was, however, that the tiny town of Naturita (pop. 665 at the time) and surrounding communities would receive the same local services as the Montrose Regional County Libraries’ other branches provided.

This meant focusing on children. “The kids in our community felt the award,” says NCL coordinator Susan Rice. “They took ownership and great pride that they were a part of something bigger than their town. One of the kids says to me, ‘This is really our award.’ Of course it is...because our kids make our library world go round.” In fact, according to Montrose library development officer Amy McBride, “We used the award money to provide children’s materials and programming. We don’t regret [that] decision...since serving children is one of our most important endeavors.”

NCL continued to receive accolades after its honor. In 2012, NCL received the National Medal for Museum and Library Service. But it is the local factors that are most important to the library, including its staff. “Our staff turned over the summer after the award,” says Rice. “The new team had been volunteering for years...an easy transition. The team joined with the knowledge of connectedness to the library and to the community. Circulation clerk Tina Carver says, “I came into the library knowing this was more than just a job. The award gave me the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of our community members and gave me resources to help our kids have an edge in building their future.”

Donna Perry worked at the library so that her family could receive food stamps. Now Perry is the library’s computer expert. “When the library won [the award], I knew it was my time to be hired. The award brought visitors from all over the country... I’m the main administrator of our Facebook page and web page. I continue to get posts with international attention because of the award.”



2012 The Independence Public Library, KS

Julie Hildebrand, director of the Independence Public Library, notes that it was her staff who let her know about the award. “One of our staff members attended a webinar about the Best Small Library in America award. She immediately came to the team and said, ‘We can win this!’ We all worked on the

submission and were very happy with the results.”

While already implementing partnerships throughout their area, Hildebrand says that national recognition helped the staff share their experiences with many libraries, even some outside the country. “We had many comments about how our story gave them hope and ideas.” The grant funds were used to upgrade staff computers and an obsolete server, plus other peripherals. Also, bonuses were awarded to staff, as there had been no wage increases since 2010.



Hildebrand confirms, “It is worth the effort, and if you win, your library will never be the same.”



2013 Southern Area Public Library, WV

When Mary Beth Stenger took over as director for Southern Area Public Library (SAPL) in 2010, she noted the Best Small Library in America award... and filed it away. After two years of work, Stenger went back to the application. “I thought we had an important story to share with other small libraries about how no matter your

building size, no matter your population size, no matter your staff size, your library can become a community hub answering the educational, social, and business needs of your patrons.”

People were already excited about the changes that had come to this small bustling library in Lost Creek, WV. With a service population of fewer than 500, it is the smallest of all the state’s public libraries. “Everyone was so happy for us,” notes Stenger. “Most everyone felt it was well deserved for all the hard work and long hours we had dedicated to improving the library... The award coming to a WV library [also] meant increased recognition...for the power of libraries across the state.”

Stenger also came up with a unique direction for the award funding: after small staff bonuses, the rest was actually set aside to support SAPL’s operating budget for the next ten years. “You have to realize that our annual budget hovers around \$32,000–\$35,000 a year. The \$20,000 is a significant amount to us—a real game changer for our library. [The award increased to this amount beginning in 2013.—Ed.] We are using the money to increase several expense categories such as supplies, staff CE, programming, collection development, and more.”

Stenger notes that the library has seen a lot more financial support from the community after it received the award. “The city has chipped in more money when needed. The county commission has offered any help that we need to continue our success. The saying ‘Everyone loves a winner’ is true.”



2014 Pine River Library, CO

“Having completed a 4,000 square foot building expansion in early 2013, in addition to an impressive 17,000 square foot community garden (our ‘living library’), staff at the Pine River Library knew that we had a perfect window of opportunity to apply for this great honor,” states Shelley Walchak, current director of the Pine River Library

(PRL). It is the “living library” that brought PRL to the attention of the awards committee. This expansive outdoor space features a 24-bed garden and a straw bale toolshed with a living roof that houses outdoor tools available for circulation. There is a fruit orchard, a 26-foot geodesic dome greenhouse, and five Nature Explore outdoor learning areas.

Former director Amy Dodson (now with Douglas County Libraries) commends the community’s support and participation. “The library is very fortunate in that it is loved and supported by the community. There are many dedicated volunteers, Friends, parents, gardeners, and community groups who treasure the library. The recognition also brought more people into the library, both first-timers and people who hadn’t been to the library in many years. The award reinforced the positive image we were building and introduced our newer services.”

Much of the award money went back into the living library. “In addition to purchasing basic garden needs such as soil and tools,” states Walchak, “we were able to enhance this incredible community asset with great signage, a beehive and ‘beecam’ for viewing bee activity, a garden loom, a bug house, a bat house, finish work on the greenhouse interior, slap drums for our Nature Explore area, a bike rack, wireless access, outdoor movie licenses to use with our outdoor movie screen, and programming costs. The funds enabled us to make this great space unquestionably irresistible to our community.”

The award allowed the library to bolster not only its support for its services but also its foothold in the library community. Dodson saw many librarians visit PRL to see the programs and services. Says Walchak, “The clout that our library has experienced within our community due to being designated the Best Small Library has allowed us to be considered as leaders and innovators.”



2015 Belgrade Community Library, MT

Director Gale Bacon had little reservation applying for this year’s Best Small Library in America award. “The Belgrade Community Library (BCL) offers a full slate of innovative programs for the community, created fearlessly and often on a shoestring. We are not afraid to try something new...,” she says.

Serving a diverse population on the outskirts of Bozeman, BCL has reimagined many of its services to meet the needs of its community through programming, partnerships, and shared services with other libraries statewide. States Bacon, “I feel very strongly that the community understand it is their award.”

The staff has reaped the benefits of the recognition as well. Besides building on their own energy and enthusiasm, Bacon notes that some of the award funding will go into continuing education for the staff, plus each staff member will be able to attend the Montana Library Association conference for multiple days. “I received the support of my local board by requesting we close for two of the days so we could have all staff take advantage of the wonderful continuing education opportunities.” Technology has always been a focus, and BCL has purchased two AWE computers for early literacy and will add public laptops and tablets for tech classes.

“Applying for the grant gave us a chance to really appreciate the work we are doing as a team,” says Bacon. “Our library evolved into a place where we qualified for the award. We achieved [the community’s] vision and dream for the library. Now, it is time to set the next vision.”