

## *Celebrating Access at the Toronto Public Library*

In March 2004, the Toronto Public Library (TPL) celebrates its 120<sup>th</sup> birthday, one of many events that are representative of the city's cultural renaissance. As an institution, the library stands at a pivotal moment; its technological capabilities give it access to materials across Ontario and around the world and its planning processes allow every Torontonian a voice in directing purchases and programming. But a question remains: Can a library system continue to satisfy the public's thirst for information at a time when the cultural and economic differences among its citizens continue to widen?

The answer is: absolutely – and do it well. TPL is the second busiest library system in the world after Hong Kong and consistently receives the highest satisfaction rating among municipal services in the City of Toronto [Ipsos-Reid 2003]. Since 1883, when Toronto voters approved a free library bylaw in that year's municipal elections, libraries have been as much a part of city planning as roads and sewers. In many cities, library construction follows development; in Toronto, the library is often the first building to be erected in a new subdivision. Once a facility opens, the work of tailoring materials and programs to the local population begins.

Since the amalgamation of Toronto's cities in 1998 and the blending of the libraries' collections, TPL now has much wider access to resources. "Librarians in our local branches continue to be the eyes and ears for their particular communities," says City Librarian Josephine Bryant. "Branches are given a budget to support autonomous collections. Staff members make purchase choices according to the types of materials that are the most popular. They also help to identify changes in their neighbourhood's ethnicity. We move our collections around from one branch to another to more properly reflect the needs of a particular area."

TPL has a total of 98 branches, two bookmobiles, dozens of specialized book and materials collections, 22 special services, two reference and research libraries, and the second-largest collection of materials on the continent (only the Boston Public Library is larger). Its 11 million books, periodicals, CDs, maps, pictures and videos include items in more than 100 languages. One in two Torontonians (1.4 million people) own a library card. TPL logged 18 million visits in 2002; this figure does not include 13.6 million virtual visits to the library's website [[www.tpl.toronto.on.ca](http://www.tpl.toronto.on.ca)].

In addition to serving the needs of people in Toronto, the provincial government conferred to TPL special library status. The province helps fund the library's Virtual Reference Library (VRL), a service that is open to anyone with Internet access. Nearly 20,000 virtual information requests were made to librarians in 2002. Several entry points or subject gateways to VRL have been designed, providing access to digital collections on-line. These include newsgathering services, historic and artistic collections, and child-friendly and student-supportive services which have been developed in collaboration with a number of partners.

As always, the library's core mission is to make information accessible to its users. Programs and services have been developed which meet the needs of those least able to take advantage of the information at hand. Seniors, persons with disabilities, new Canadians, people for whom English is a second language, reluctant readers, people without Internet access in their homes, areas currently without a library, children and youth – all receive special attention.

### *Getting books to where they are needed*

The Toronto Public Library keeps 14 cube vans on the road to meet the demand for library materials across the city – a service increasingly called upon due to the popularity of TPL's on-line 'holds' system. In addition, two bookmobiles are kept busy servicing communities and audiences that find it difficult to get to the library – children, seniors and lower-income residents – and areas where funds or population do not allow for new library construction. The newest bookmobile is outfitted with access to TPL's on-line catalogue, databases and web page, and is equipped with a wheel-chair lift, thereby combining state-of-the-art access with state-of-the-art convenience.

More than 152,000 items are circulated through the bookmobiles annually.

TPL makes home library deliveries for people who are housebound for medical reasons or because of infirmity. In 2002, some 628,000 items were used by 2,125 homebound customers. The library also maintains 69 deposit collections in nursing homes and seniors' residences.

### *Focus on technology*

The TPL has 1,800 computers spread throughout its system, 1,300 of which have high-speed Internet connections. The library makes these computers available to its patrons – not only for the purpose of locating materials on the shelves or in other branches, but for their own research as well. The library's website allows the reservation of computers for personal use for up to one hour at a time. In 2002, 5.29 million people used the Internet workstations. "About one-third of Canadians do not have home Internet access. Libraries provide an important bridge for people who are unable to afford the high prices of high technology," says Bryant.

Libraries have always been early adopters of computer technology to facilitate access to information. A recent innovation – electronic books – is being offered in six TPL branches as an alternative to the paper variety. Patrons may borrow "Rocket e-books" – hand-held, battery-operated computers that can store up to ten paperback books. The readers are checked out along with a battery recharger. In addition, 3,500 e-book titles are available on-line.

Technology at the service of persons with disabilities is opening up worlds of information to individuals who previously had been excluded



*Toronto libraries often are the first buildings erected in new subdivisions.*

from participation. TPL has a vast array of technical aids<sup>1</sup> and adapted materials available for use and borrowing. Its services include a centre for persons with disabilities (this includes services, equipment and personal assistance at the centrally-located reference library), sign language interpretation, a home library service, a disability resource collection and study rooms that are intended specifically for persons with disabilities. Patrons also can apply for a fine-exempt status.

Access to technology is only the first step. The more people learn about information pathways and the difficulties of linking and verifying information, the more aware they become of their own research shortcomings. TPL offers courses that teach users how to locate and validate specific information. Today's librarians are information professionals – a vital resource in the knowledge economy. Library schools now offer two distinct streams of training – one for those who wish to be library professionals, and the other for those interested

in information architecture (the process of structuring information for easy accessibility and understanding).

### ***Responding to community voices***

Just as card catalogues have faded away and been replaced by banks of computers, the process by which library collections are governed continues to evolve. Technology has enabled the library to find new ways to be more responsive to the desires of its patrons.

In 1999, the Toronto Public Library Board undertook its first community consultation since the cities of Toronto were amalgamated in 1998. The purpose of the consultation was to inform the development of the library's strategic plan for 2000-03. During that process, library board members heard two clear messages: Torontonians wanted their libraries to be open longer and they wanted more materials added to the collection. A second round of consulta-

## *community stories*

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tions in 2003 for the 2004-06 planning document revealed that patrons would still like to see longer hours and larger collections. They also want to have library services intended for their specific needs; youth want their own space and better CD collections while new Torontonians want more ESL materials.

“Patrons – in their languages choices and reading preferences – influence our purchasing decisions,” says Josephine Bryant. “If we buy a book that suddenly becomes a best-seller, for example, we will add more copies to our collection to meet public demand. But that is only one of our roles. The other – as archivist

– continues to expand. A visit to Ontario History Quest (part of the Virtual Reference Library) demonstrates a combined archive from TPL, the City of Toronto and the Archives of Ontario. It blends the best archival material into one site.”

Staying in touch with the grassroots also means that local branches are encouraged to develop personalities that meet the needs of their patrons. One branch, for example, serves children from a low socioeconomic background whose parents work long hours. In this case, the librarians are young and they act as mentors, helping children with homework assignments and building an atmosphere of noisy,



*Library branches reflect the personality of their neighbourhoods.*



mutual respect. More recently, libraries are being built which incorporate other civic structures – schools and community centres – mirroring the more clustered development now common in Toronto suburbs. Twinning a library with a new school is particularly effective at a time when cuts to educational funding have meant that fewer resources are available for growing school library collections.

### *Raising funds, making friends*

Many of TPL's programs and services have been enriched by a wide array of partnerships. Businesses, foundations, government departments and volunteers have donated collections, services, technology and programs to TPL since the Toronto Public Library Foundation was formed in 1997.<sup>2</sup> TD Financial Group, for example, is sponsoring several library programs, including the TD Gallery – a free access art gallery located in the Toronto Reference Library, a summer reading club and a kindergarten outreach program called "Start Smart" which encourages kindergarten-aged children to obtain their own library cards. TV Ontario (TVO) is a joint sponsor of the TD Financial Group's "Reading Ranger" website. This interactive site for young readers offers word games and title suggestions as well as links to TVO web pages.

CultureLink, an immigrant settlement organization, works with TPL to offer English conversation programs at selected libraries. The Settlement and Education Partnerships in Toronto (SEPT) allows settlement workers from various agencies to come to the library to help newcomers with settlement information and interpretation. Workers also introduce library services to adults and children. Ontario Legal Aid lawyers provide free legal advice and guidance to patrons at specific branches. In

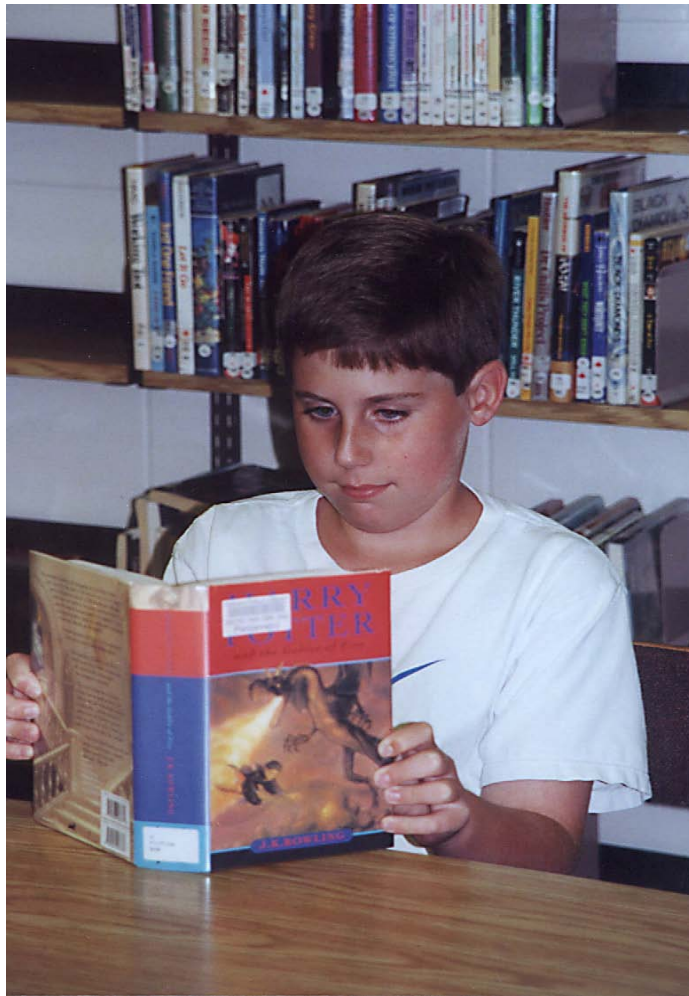
co-sponsorship with the Toronto Public and Catholic Boards of Education, many libraries offer classes in English conversation, grammar and writing at a beginner, intermediate or advanced level.

TPL actively recruits volunteers to staff its adult and child literacy programs, after-school homework clubs for elementary-aged children, and homework and reading skills clubs for students in grades 7 to 12. The Friends of the Library is a volunteer organization that helps support TPL programs and services through fundraising, promotion and the provision of personal and professional services.

### *Access to a wider world*

For TPL, the meaning of the word accessibility has expanded beyond materials provision and building access. It also has come to mean extending invitations to all Torontonians to experience the wide array of cultural offerings their city has to offer. Lectures by artists and writers, open dialogue opportunities with an author in residence, presentations of art, music and dance – all are provided free of charge by TPL. In this way, a window on established and new Canadian culture is open for viewing. Creating an appetite for greater cultural awareness and participation is TPL's contribution to Toronto's cultural renaissance.

A lively debate has resulted from the last round of community consultations which suggest that the library has overstepped its primary role as the city's information repository and strayed too far into cultural programming and literacy activities. Library Board Chairman Gillian Mason is not distressed by the criticism; rather, she is pleased that the library and its place in society are receiving the attention they deserve. "Healthy debate, combined



*More than 65 percent of children in Toronto have library cards.*

with fiscal realism, help us to achieve a clarity of vision,” says Mason. “The Toronto Public Library’s main purpose continues to be the inspiration of lifelong learning, the joy of reading and the pursuit of knowledge for people of all ages and backgrounds – beginning with the very young.”

“TPL services cost an average Toronto household \$82 per year, or roughly \$1.50 per week,” Mason continues. “In terms of the social capital the Library delivers to the city, that’s extremely good value for the money.” Though no one disputes the library’s return for invest-

ment, recent municipal budget deliberations suggest that TPL may not receive the 6.6 percent increase requested by the Board, but instead may have to work with less – somewhere between 5.2 and 5.7 percent. “While we are indeed asking for an increase,” Mason notes, “the 6.6 percent recommended by the Board only just keeps on top of the cost of doing business. Anything lower and we will have to consider cuts to our collections and service.”

Municipal operating budgets continue to support a service which is critical to Toronto’s growth and the integration of its citizens. New

Canadians have only one institution that provides free access to information, knowledge and cultural context – the library. Libraries are “monuments to the human condition, containing our wisdom, our folly, our fears and our dreams. They remember our past, serve the present, and are the launching pads to our future” [von Hoelle 2000].

TPL recently produced a video that highlights its literacy and English as a Second Language programming. In it, a 6-year-old girl is reading for the first time in English to her Spanish-speaking mother. The pride in her accomplishment shines in the child’s face, and off camera, her mother’s eyes fill with tears. TPL’s commitment to literacy programming provides its users with a launching pad for life. In serving a public with such wide needs and interests, TPL makes it possible for Toronto citizens to engage one another in dialogue, and in the ever-evolving and expanding cultural reality that is Canada.

Haroon Siddiqui, editorial page Editor Emeritus for *The Toronto Star*, in referring to the TPL, stated: “If our public schools are the common cathedral for our children, then our public libraries are the common cathedral of our adults ... in effect, public libraries help forge tolerance and engender respect for differences, enhance a sense of belonging and advance Canadian citizenship” [Siddiqui 2001].

Whatever the outcome of this year’s municipal budget deliberations, TPL’s commitment to social inclusion, breaking down cultural and economic barriers and providing state-of-the-art tools for accessing information will help ensure the future health and vitality of Toronto’s communities.

*Anne Makhoul*

*Anne Makhoul coordinates the community stories series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.*

*TPL Library Board Chairman Gillian Mason can be reached by e-mail at: gmason@capam.ca*

*City Librarian Josephine Bryant can be reached by e-mail at: citylibrarian@tpl.toronto.on.ca*

#### **Endnotes**

1. Technical aids available at TPL include: large-print books, magnifiers, bookstands, page turners, special reading lamps, assistive listening systems, descriptive and closed caption videos, library catalogues with enlarged print, enlarging photocopiers, audio books, closed caption decoders, computer workstations with accessibility technology, Kurzweil personal reading machines (a reading device that converts type into a voice – training also provided by TPL), microfiche readers with magnification lenses, talking books, telephone devices for the deaf, closed caption videos, descriptive videos (these include narrative that describes action during dialogue breaks) and wheelchairs for in-house use.

2. Toronto Public Library Foundation has raised \$10 million since 1997. Its partners include: The Toronto Star, the Ministry of Energy, Science and Technology, ExtendMedia, Cisco Systems, Helios/Oceana and Silicon Graphics, Millennium Bureau of Canada, TD Bank Financial Group, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Industry Canada’s Urban Community Access Program, the Catherine and Maxwell Meighen Foundation, the Friends of Toronto Public Library (North and South Chapters) and the Starbucks Coffee Company.

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1Y 4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340

Fax: (613) 729-3896

E-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org)

Website: [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org)