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

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.

By Kristi Chadwick

2005 Haines Borough Public Library, AK

The inaugural winner, Haines Borough Public Library, was not 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 philosophies 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 Reba Heaton, currently the assistant director, says, “We were proud of our library before we got the award and were just as proud after.”

“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 one that would still support the sustainability of the library. The funds went toward the 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 board allowed us to offer Internet used for HVAC maintenance and offsetting heating fuel.

In the years since, library use continues to grow, with programs 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.

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2006 Milanof-Schock Library, PA

“Every library is unique to the community it serves,” states Debora Roser-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 80 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 helped to develop a new 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 be 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 for 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 boards allowed us to collect development funds.” 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.’”

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2008 Chelsea District Library, MI

“It’s hard to believe that 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 Global Learning Meeting, a global conference on libraries held in South Africa.

“Libraries build community. These were the magical words that we built our vision of the future around,” notes Harmer. “The library was not 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 was no way that the award was a coincidence,” notes Nancy Rosenwald, former director of the Union County Carnegie Library. “Marsha Jordan (Hathcock then), our tech-...
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 towns 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 knew that their questions had been recognized by people who had been in the library a lot, or who had heard about the library, before they had even entered the library. This was the beginning of something bigger than the town of Naturita, or even the county. This was the beginning 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 made our library world go round.” In fact, according to Montrose library development officer Amy McIntire, “We used the award money to purchase children’s materials and programing. We don’t regret [that decision]... since serving children is what libraries do best.”

NCL continued to receive considerable support 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 of 2010, so we had to learn to do things differently,” says Rice. “The team joined with the knowledge of connectedness to the library and to the community. Circulation, with our very busy 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 helped me resources to help our kids have an edge in the future.”

Donna Perry worked at the library so that her family would be able to receive food stamps. Now Perry is the library’s community assist coordinator. “The community, for the first time, has a library member. Our library member is the food pantry worker. It is wonderful to have a library member.”

Open seven days a week, the library is fortunate to have stable tax funding and support. This has allowed the library to implement increases in technology, programing, and transformative moments as an organization through the award process,” says Rosenwald, “you have already won!”

2013 Southern Area Public Library, WV

When Mary Beth Stenger took over as director of the Best Small Library in America in 2010, she noted the Best Small Library in America award... and filed it away. After two years of working with the Library, Stenger wrote an application. “I thought we had an important story to tell, with a small基层... but what do you do when you have 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 economic needs of our 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, yet it is a source of pride for its community through programming, partnerships, and support from the county. “They already knew that their hard work and long hours 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 librarians want to do: make note of their accomplishments. “We applied for the award in 2008 and were selected as a runner-up,” states Andrea Bacon, “We won the award in 2012.”

While already implementing partnerships throughout their area, Hildebrand said that the recognition helped the staff share their experiences with many libraries, even some outside the country. “We had many comments about how our small community library in Bacon, Montana, is the place we have been searching for 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 Belgrade Community Library, MT

Serving a diverse population on the outskirts of Bozeman, BCL has remanaged many of its services to meet the needs of the community through programming, partnerships, and shared services with other libraries statewide. State 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 this has been a springboard into continued 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 libraries and tablets for tech classes.

Applying for the grant gave us a chance to really appreciate the work we are doing. We are doing it just well that the library has 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.”

2015 Glen Carbon Centennial Library, IL

“We applied for the award in 2008 and were selected as a runner-up,” states former Glen Carbon Centennial Librar (GCCL) director Anne Hughes. “That was a wonderful honor, but the staff wanted to try again for the top spot.” In 2012, we worked hard over the next two years to improve in the specified focus areas of the application.”

Julie Hildebrand, director of the Independence Public Library, KS

“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 garden and a small house 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.

2015 Pine River Library, Library, CO

“Everyone was so happy for us,” according to Montrose Regional County Libraries’ other branches provided.

“This award allowed the library to bolster not only its support for its services but also its foothold in the library community. Now we are seen more as partners in programs and services. Says Walchak, “The community library has experienced within our community due to being designated the Best Small Library has allowed us to be considered as leaders and innovators.”