

Grady Library remaining relevant

Written by MARK JAEGER

Wednesday, 30 January 2013 19:00

Despite digital era, facility draws more than 1,000 patrons a week

Don't tell Oscar Grady Library Director Jen Gerber that libraries have become obsolete in the digital age.

You might also want to keep that opinion from the nearly 54,000 patrons who used the Saukville library last year.

"For a community of just over 4,000 people, to have that many people come to our library in a year is astounding," Gerber said.

"That number is by far the most users we have had in a year. The user numbers show how much the community values its library."

Gerber points to some solid numbers that demonstrate the local library has managed to remain relevant.



The greatest growth was seen in those areas which tap into technology.

"Our Internet use was up 5.7% for the year, which I think can be traced to the economy. People have had to make cuts in their household budgets, but keep Internet access by going to the library," Gerber said.

That number is certain to be considerably higher if you include the number of patrons who have taken advantage of the library's free WiFi service.

"There is really no way of tracking how many WiFi users we are getting," Gerber said.

She said the library also saw an 11% jump in Website "hits," a portal that offers tips on technology skills and provides access to Overdrive e-book borrowing.

"Our circulation was actually down 3.7% for last year, which we couldn't explain until we realized how many people were accessing books through e-books," Gerber said.

Because the digital files are not counted in the borrowing numbers, that growing use was not taken into consideration. Library patrons completed nearly 1,400 digital loans from May to December.

A more precise account of e-borrowing will be available this year.

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"I have a Nook, and it is so nice to be able to access new books from the device without having to lug them around," Gerber said.

"Even though I am at the library every day, I get overdue fines too, and the e-books are nice because they are never overdue. They just disappear off my device."

Gerber said library users are also becoming more savvy in the use of EasiCat, the online system that logs requests for materials from anywhere in the Eastern Shores Library System.

"EasiCat is getting a lot of use. On a busy night, our staff can come in and find 100 'pull' requests for items we have in our collection," she said.

That may seem like a drain on the library's materials, but Gerber said the system is a two-way street.

"We have one of the smallest collections in the system, so EasiCat makes a lot more items available to our users," she said.

The library has shown flexibility in switching technology based on user demand, such as the universal acceptance of DVDs as a video media.

Reflecting that commitment is the free VHS tape giveaway the library will be holding Tuesday through Thursday, Feb. 5 to 7.

"We had three shelves of VHS that weren't getting a lot of use. Tapes are still being borrowed by some users, especially older patrons who want programs that aren't available on DVD, so we decided to give the collection away," Gerber said.

An exact count hasn't been taken, but she estimated there are at least 500 tapes available.

"We have had people stop in asking if they could preview the tapes we have, but we decided to make it fair to everyone and not allow anyone access until Tuesday," Gerber said.

The library also began charging a \$1 a week rental fee for new release DVDs and found the option very well received.

"People really seem to like that option, and whatever money we make is used to buy more DVDs to keep the collection current," Gerber said.

From a selection of 60 rental DVDs, she said 45 are typically being borrowed by patrons at any given time.

In another upgrading move, Gerber said the library has purchased a new collection of 300 paperback romance novels.

"They are very popular, with some people borrowing a dozen at a time. The new books should

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be on the shelf for Valentine's Day," she said.

The old collection of romance reading will be sold during the next Friends of the Library book sale, raising money for new books.

Gerber said technology has also saved the library a considerable amount of money.

"We were having a lot of DVDs 'walk out the door,' so we installed eight video cameras. I hate to jinx things, but since we put the cameras in we haven't had one DVD stolen," she said.

Care is taken in how the cameras are deployed to ensure that reading or Internet surfing habits of patrons is not compromised.

"Privacy of our patrons remains a top priority," Gerber said.

Image Information: SAUKVILLE'S OSCAR GRADY Library is preparing to give away its entire VHS tape collection to make room for its growing DVD selection. Tapes covering a variety of subjects and styles, from feature films to documentaries, will be offered in the community room on a first-come basis during open hours from Tuesday to Thursday, Feb. 5 to 7. Staff member Kathy Lepak sorted through some of the estimated 500 tapes the library intends to clear from its shelves. The library is at 151 S. Main St. Photo by Mark Jaeger