

Beyond Books

Under Anne Cain's leadership, Contra Costa's libraries have become high-tech community centers.

BY DEBORAH BURSTYN



Photograph by Martin Klimek

When Anne Cain was growing up in the suburbs of Boston, her local library refused to carry Nancy Drew mysteries. Cain had to borrow the beloved books from a neighbor, and the memory of that would one day spur her ambition to transform Contra Costa County's library system into one of the most inclusive and innovative in the United States.

During Cain's 18 years in Contra Costa, the last nine as head librarian, the system became the first in the nation to make library cards instantly available online and to start installing ATM-style book-dispensing kiosks. Cain has delivered services to people previously shut out of libraries: young inmates at Juvenile Hall in Martinez and the Byron Boys Ranch, migrant day laborers in Concord, and those who can't read at all. Project Second Chance, the system's adult literacy program, has helped more than 4,000 adults.

Cain's other accomplishments? The library system inaugurated its first marathon reading festival in May and won a legal battle over the separation of church and state this past October. That's when the U.S. Supreme Court left intact an earlier federal appeals court ruling that said the system was entitled to deny the use of a meeting room in the Antioch library to a church group wanting to hold prayer services.

Cain's greatest triumph may be in keeping the county's 25 libraries relevant in an era of the Internet, chain bookstores, and Amazon.com. The system now provides online access to its multimedia reference databases and catalog of 1.4 million books, DVDs, and music CDs. And, in a time of dwindling public finances, Cain has partnered with cities to expand library hours and plan construction of new state-of-the-art libraries in Clayton, Danville, Orinda, San Ramon, Lafayette, and Walnut Creek.

Diablo recently met with Cain, a divorced mother of two grown sons, in her Pleasant Hill office to talk about how she and her staff are helping local libraries evolve into the 21st century.

Do libraries still matter?

Some people still think of a library as just a place for books. But, more and more people understand that today's libraries have become the community's living room. Libraries have become a welcoming, safe place for teens to hang out, for senior citizens to gather, and for newly arrived immigrants to learn how to become part of our culture. Our libraries offer a place for new parents to bring their little ones for programs, for job seekers and entrepreneurs to get business help. People from the community and of all ages and all backgrounds come together here on a voluntary basis. Where else today does that happen? Libraries are uniquely positioned to achieve community in the real sense.

How do you come up with ideas for your pioneering programs?

I'm not the only idea person around here. We have an incredibly talented staff. For example, one of our staff returned from a visit to Sweden and told us about the [ATM-style] book vending machines there. We thought that might be something for us, so we went after grants, and now we're getting four of those machines. When the county built the new Juvenile Hall, it had the foresight to put in a room for a library. Two of our staff members wrote a grant application to the Leshner Foundation and got \$100,000 to create it. Then, two staff members saw that there was a gap to fill after the kids left Juvenile Hall. They wrote another application and got \$70,000 to start a library at Byron Boys Ranch.

What motivates your staff?

Their motivation arises from needs we perceive in the community. Take the e-Card [the online library cards]. I didn't just one day say, "Oh, let's have e-Cards." We had staff going out to schools, training teachers and kids on how to use the electronic databases via our website. The staff quickly realized there was no point to that if teachers and kids couldn't access the databases because they didn't have library cards to log in. So, we hired someone to create a broadband program for us that enables us to issue instant library cards. We've gone out to schools, Juvenile Hall, local fairs, you name it. We've issued thousands of library cards that way.

We realize that people can't always come to the library. So, we try to bring the library to the people.

Are people reading less now?

Not in Contra Costa. This year, we expect to reach a new record of close to 6 million library items circulated. I checked to make sure that it's not all movies, and it turns out that it's mostly books.

Do you ever think about leaving this job for something less stressful?

I am not too young to think about retiring, but it's not going to happen anytime soon. I work about 50 to 60 hours a week. I could not have done this job when my kids were little. A lot of library events are in the evenings and on weekends. This is not a job for someone who wants to work 8 to 5. If I was home every night of the week by 6 p.m., there'd be something wrong. But, I am getting paid, and there are so many people who work so hard for our libraries and are not getting paid. Our volunteers inspire me.

What will we see more of in the future?

Self-service. People like to reserve materials online, then do the checkout themselves. We also are expanding our streaming video and downloadable e-books and audiobooks. You'll be able to listen to your library book. And, we'd like to have more book vending machines at BART stations and in shopping centers. We realize that people can't always come to the library. So, we try to bring the library to the people. New technology gives us new ways to do that.

Cool free stuff

- Here's what's available from your branch library or the Contra Costa County Library website at www.ccclib.org.
- Downloadable classical music and e-books, including best-sellers, classic fiction, and nonfiction books, and animated kids e-books with big print and voice-overs in English, Spanish, and French.
- Streaming audio and video databases, including the Smithsonian Institution's collection of American folk music and jazz, and 250 top theater performances, starring such greats as Anthony Hopkins, Helen Mirren, Meryl Streep, and Laurence Olivier.
- Online magazine and newspaper databases that allow you to find and read any article in publications ranging from the Contra Costa Times to In Style magazine to the New England Journal of Medicine.
- Wi-fi: All Contra Costa libraries have become free "hot spots," offering wireless (wi-fi) access to the Internet.
- Live homework help: A network of more than 2,000 professional certified tutors in math, science, social studies, and English offers free tutoring daily from 1 to 10 p.m. AskNow: Live 24-hour research help from trained reference librarians.
- Books a Go-Go: Four new Swedish-designed book dispensers are coming to Contra Costa County. One was to be installed at BART's Pittsburg/Bay Point station by the end of May; another is heading for Pleasant Hill's new BART Transit Village in 2010.