

An Interview with Cynthia Berner-Harris, Library Director in Wichita

Posted by Shannon Roy, Editor

The Kansas Libraries Newsletter staff is planning an occasional feature called Movers and Shakers in Kansas Libraries. It is a somewhat daunting prospect, given the caliber of library leaders in Kansas. We may duck some of the responsibility by asking system personnel to nominate outstanding librarians. But the Wichita Public Library Director was chosen because the State Library staff has received so much help from Cynthia Berner-Harris in the past two years. Cynthia's work as Chair of the Kansas Center for the Book Board of Affiliates and as local liaison for the Kansas Book Festival has been especially appreciated in recent months.

How long have you been director of Wichita Public?

I joined the staff at Wichita Public in August, 1984 after two years with the Winfield Public Library and just under a year as System Consultant for the Panhandle Library Network in Nebraska. I worked as Westlink Branch Manager, Coordinator of Extension Services and Coordinator of Administrative Services before being appointed Director of Libraries in October 2000.

On my first official day as Director I received a subpoena to appear in Federal Court with an item from our library collection. I confess, I wondered what I'd gotten myself into, but some quick work on the part of our Law Department resolved that issue quickly and painlessly. Certainly there have been challenges during these first few years as director – particularly during the period where we consolidated four of our smallest branches into two new larger ones. Then we closed and then we were directed to reopen a fifth small branch. This was all within six months! It is a big factor that the staff of the Wichita Public Library is outstanding. They make my job easy and enjoyable.

What are the major projects or developments at Wichita Public Library right now?

Where should I begin? Only today, I met with the City Manager to review the preliminary results of a master planning process for library facilities that has been under way for over a year. We expect to "go public" with the recommendations within the next 30 days. There will be many meetings and presentations to follow as we move the plan toward adoption and implementation. If we are able to make the changes that are being discussed, the next decade will be very interesting for this library system!

In addition, we are in the early stages of a migration from Dynix to Horizon Automation System.

Our "go live" date is in December. Between now and then, however, we'll also be installing our first self-check system and workstation timing and print management on all of the public access computers throughout the system.

Last year we were able to increase our materials budget from all funding sources to over \$1,000,000 for the first time in our history. That is a great thing, but it also stretches the resources of our Technical Services Section. As a result, we're also closing in on a "go live" implementation with Brodart for use of their Compleat Book Serv cataloging and processing services so that our orders will be received in shelf-ready condition. We see this as a way to help us increase the capacity of our Technical Services operation in spite of our inability to add staffing.

How large is your staff? How many branches does Wichita currently have?

Our authorized staffing from the City of Wichita is 112.3 FTE. We supplement that with an additional 8.62 FTE from our State Aid, Talking Books and South Central System grants.

At present, we operate a Central Library, one regional branch (Alford), three district branches (Evergreen, Rockwell and Westlink), and four neighborhood branches (Angelou, Comotara, Linwood and Orchard). We also partner in the operation of the Planeview Community Library as part of an agreement between the City Council and the USD 259 Board of Education.

Has the Wichita Public Library been an Affiliate for the Center for the Book? Why did you want to join?

The Wichita Public Library is a charter affiliate of the Center for the Book. Over the past five years one of our areas of emphasis has been growth of adult programming, much of which is related to the humanities. We've just completed our third annual adult reading program. We continue to work to build book discussion groups and other programs. Earlier this month we were able to have Mo Willems here for a program and book signing. That program attracted 275 people. Being a part of the Center For the Book seemed like a natural fit for our library as we continue our efforts in these areas.

Can you tell us what you are doing in Wichita to prepare for the Kansas Book Festival? Are any of your staff members helping with that?

The Wichita Public Library is the anchor of the local arrangements committee for the Kansas

Book Festival. As a liaison to the Governor's Council on Cultural Affairs, my duties seem to have evolved into helping match the needs of the Council with local individuals, venues and companies that can deliver the services that will be needed to make the Festival a great event. In addition to working on lease agreements for the sites for the events, we also have to consider things like tents, stages, sound systems, banners, food vendors, security, permits, hotel rooms, etc. Our local Convention and Visitors Bureau came onboard early in the process and has been an invaluable source of expertise and assistance. Vikki Jo Stewart and I have also successfully recruited the very best party planners in Wichita so the Black and White & READ All Over Ball is certain to be an event that no one will want to miss!

By the time the event draws nearer, we'll have several members of our staff actively involved in the Kansas Book Festival efforts. At present, only a handful have specific job assignments as we are still waiting for the program schedule to become finalized in order to determine our complete volunteer needs. Without a doubt, any member of the Wichita Public Library staff that wishes to have a volunteer role will have a job waiting for them before or during the Festival.

Have you been working with any of the statewide resource sharing projects?

We hosted the Resource Sharing Summit during the early months of Christie Brandau's administration. We're one of the original ILDP libraries. From the start, Wichita Public Library staff members have been part of the KanAnswer team. We've been asked by Rhonda Machlan to be a test site for the AGen/Illiad interface project. That is a system that will help larger libraries manage interlibrary loan services more easily. Our staff will have to investigate that but I know we are very interested in that enhancement.

Has Wichita begun their participation in the Overdrive Project? Do you think this project will benefit your library users?

The Wichita Public Library was one of the first libraries to make a commitment to the Overdrive project. The library is doing so with assistance from the Friends of the Wichita Public Library. We intend to integrate holdings into our own catalog as well as through the statewide site. We responded so quickly because we know how much our library customers will benefit from this new access. Over the past several months, requests for downloadable audio titles have increased steadily. Our orders have been placed and we are looking forward to finalizing our plans for rollout to our customers.

Do you have any thoughts on the kind of continuing education that would particularly benefit

your large staff? Are they interested in working with online programs or desktop courses?

As a department of the City of Wichita, we benefit from a comprehensive training program available to all city employees. We supplement that with a strong in-house library-specific training program. Last year, we held a day-long in-service training day for all of our staff. To date, we have not done a lot with online training programs or desktop courses, but I see that developing over the next couple of years. We've just received a Polycom so we'll soon be adding videoconferencing to the list of options available in-house as well.

Do you have any comments on recent Kansas library development?

I'm thrilled at the direction and leadership the State Library is providing. The State Library is helping Kansas libraries to become more innovative and more responsive to our citizens. Within Wichita city government we're working on changes that will be realigning budgets in order to put the money into the programs and services that are most needed and wanted by our residents. That change isn't easy. In fact, at this stage of the process it is simply scary. Even so, it just makes sense. That undoubtedly colors my view of the changes happening at the State Library level. Having the courage to ask why we do things the way they are being done is very important. To have the willingness to make changes when they will improve service to library users and Kansas citizens is essential if our libraries are to remain valued parts of our respective units of government.