

"Learning is for Everyone" Project is Very Successful in Junction City

by Susan Moyer, Director, Dorothy Bramlage Public Library

"That's life." This everyday expression is often one of resignation used when encountering one of life's mysteries and inconsistencies. It is often accompanied by a shrug and a "whadayagonnado" type of gesture. Tired of ending too many conversations about library programming in this manner, the Dorothy Bramlage Public Library (DBPL) in Junction City decided to start a new conversation that now begins with "That's LIFE."

The Learning Is for Everyone (LIFE) community education program was launched approximately five years ago as a guide to develop affordable programs that are relevant to the needs of the patron base. It was created as a remedy to what was beginning to feel like a shot-in-the-dark approach to program development as well as a means to address some of the obvious gaps in the area's learning opportunities.

"Is there anyplace where. . ." and "Does anybody do. . ." were the beginnings of common questions from patrons seeking to learn more about a variety of topics, from recreational and leisure pursuits to business and professional issues. Too often the answer was no, or yes, but in a neighboring community. Many of these were in subject areas well outside of the library's programming comfort zone and were for ongoing instruction rather than the usual one-time introduction followed by book and web lists to promote self-education with library resources.

When commiserating with staff from other agencies, we found that many of them were experiencing similar situations. At the same time, most were also struggling with finding new and affordable publicity vehicles to make the public more aware of the programs that they did offer. Clearly, a change was in order and DBPL opted to take on the role of its catalyst.

First, the staff decided to shift our focus from "programs" to "classes," that is, true learning opportunities that would take place in single sittings, short series or ongoing meetings as appropriate. Second, we opted to utilize the skills and talents of community volunteers, asking them to share their knowledge with others. Third, and perhaps most important, we also decided to solicit the participation of other local agencies to help paint the full picture of learning opportunities in the community. In short, we opted to create a coordinated community education program and LIFE was born.

It was launched with the assistance of a series of small grants from the Community Resources Program administered through the UFM Community Learning Center in Manhattan (www.tryufm.org). UFM, which was created in 1968, served as the original model for the program which is described as "a uniquely Kansas approach to community development and joint learning." It provides for a maximum of \$9,000 to be issued over a three year period with a matching component that increases each year. Additional information about the grant is available at the program web site at www.k-state.edu/ufm/CRA%20Grant%20Application.pdf.

Per UFM staff, six communities are currently receiving grants for their developing programs. These include Inman and Glasgow (1st year), Ottawa and Mount Hope (2nd year) and Spring Hill and Salina (3rd and final year). Some programs are being offered through new organizations created specifically for community education while others are occurring through existing organizations, such as PRIDE, to enhance that group's efforts. Like Junction City, the Ottawa and Salina programs are library-based.

LIFE is actually an organization of organizations directed by a Steering Committee composed of representatives of each of the participating agencies. In addition to the library, the current participants include: the American Red Cross of Geary County, Armed Service YMCA, Geary Community Hospital, Geary County K-State Research and Extension, Junction City Arts Council, Junction City Family YMCA, Junction City/Geary County Economic Development Commission, Junction City/Geary County Health Department, Junction City Recreation Department, Milford Nature Center, and USD 475. The Small Business Development Center-Washburn is also affiliated with the program.

The partners are dedicated to providing education, recreation and leisure opportunities for the people of the Junction City area. Each holds the philosophy that the quality of life in any community is dependent upon the opportunity for the personal development of its citizens. This includes their ability to pursue their interests and to learn about the things they enjoy. LIFE provides a means for people do this, as well as to exchange ideas and to share their knowledge with others.

The Steering Committee meets twice per semester at gatherings coordinated by the library. Based upon the "if you feed them, they will come" premise, each is a lunch meeting with the meal also furnished by DBPL. Here the partners have the opportunity to talk about their plans for the upcoming semester, coordinate with other agencies that offer similar activities and develop new offerings that meet the ever-changing needs of the community.

Each participating agency is responsible for the development and delivery of their own activities, including registering students and collecting fees. Each also has their own policies regarding cancellations, refunds and rescheduling. Suggestions for courses from either prospective teachers or prospective students are collected at the library and shared with the appropriate agency.

All of the classes and activities included each semester are listed in a directory, the production of which accounts for the main expense of the program. It is funded by annual contributions from each of the partners and widely distributed at a minimum cost including as an insert in a Sunday edition of the local newspaper, as well as that which serves Ft. Riley. Since the school district is one of the participating partners, it is also offered through school mail to each student and staff member in the district. The partners also receive copies for handout at their buildings. In addition, a program web site, www.jclib.org/LIFE.htm, was launched this year.

Directory listings are grouped by topic such as Books and Reading, Creative Arts and Youth Activities. A new feature listing public meeting space and agency speaking programs was also recently added.

Included among the library-sponsored classes this semester are sessions on money management, feng shui, cribbage and metal detecting. Also here are sessions advising parents on preparing their children for college as well as those helping adults prepare themselves for their first post-high school enrollment. In addition, ongoing instruction in crochet, basket making and meditation is also included.

Community response to the program has been very positive. Patrons regularly offer their suggestions for classes they would like to take as well as their services for those they would like to teach. They have also come to rely on the directory as a tool to keep abreast of the area's happenings. In addition, the program development staff feels that they are tapping directly into the needs and interests of the community and are more on-target with their offerings. Now, that's LIFE!