

Center for Lifelong Learning at the Morrill Public Library

by Susan Bryant, Library Assistant, Morrill Public Library, Hiawatha, KS

A long-held vision for a free, library-based, community education program became a reality in October 2006 at the Morrill Public Library in Hiawatha.

“Like other libraries our size, we have always offered programs for all ages: book clubs, summer reading, story times and speakers on many different topics,” says Cathy Newland, Library Director. “But we have long wanted to expand these offerings using the concept of a ‘Center for Lifelong Learning,’ and publish a quarterly catalog of classes.”

A survey last year showed that patrons were most eager for computer classes, so one of the first issues the library faced was finding space and equipment to conduct the classes. We were fortunate to receive a memorial gift from the family of a former library employee and long-time library friend, enabling us to purchase laptop computers, a computer storage cabinet, wireless Internet network, and other equipment needed for a portable computer lab. The classes are now held in the library’s lower-level meeting room, rather than on the busy main floor of the library. This allows our existing computers to remain available for patron use while the classes are in session.

The next step was to develop the content for the computer classes our staff would teach. The Northeast Kansas Library System staff and technology trainers from larger libraries were extremely helpful in this process. NEKLS hosted a workshop on teaching technology. They also provide ongoing support when technology problems arise. Tech trainers at other libraries have been generous about sharing their handouts and experiences with us.

“One of our staff members was a professional teacher,” says Cathy, “and all of them have a lot of expertise and experience teaching patrons on a one-on-one basis.” Library staff members currently teach basic computer use, as well as classes on blogging, using Flickr, instant-messaging and other topics.

The library has also partnered with other community organizations, including the Area Agency on Aging and the Brown County Genealogy Society, to teach classes. Steve Brown, Director of Brown County K-State Research and Extension, has led classes as diverse as GPS, Google Earth, “How to Choose a New Computer,” and “iPods and iTunes for Adults.”

“I think it’s a great partnership because both of our organizations are in the information dissemination business,” says Brown. “The library provides a large, easy-to-reach audience for K-State Research and Extension, which makes our job much easier. I think we benefit the library in return with our knowledge of community needs and having access to the latest research-based information from the Land Grant University System.”

Not all of the classes on the “Center for Lifelong Learning” schedule involve computers, or are aimed chiefly at adults. Our monthly Conversational Spanish class has attracted a small but devoted (and fun-loving) group, and the Letterboxing class found a group of future hobbyists intently carving their personalized letterboxing stamps. In the future, we would like to offer even more in the way of gardening, craft, and other hobby-type topics.

But if “the proof is in the pudding,” we can look to the frequent phone inquiries we get about our classes, how often we need to print more class schedules to fill the displays, and the long waiting lists for filled classes as an indication that the program is heading in the right direction. We know we are getting favorable “word of mouth” publicity. We also are happy to have some success stories to report--especially those about new computer users who now come to the library daily to check their e-mail.

Library patron Vivian Nolte reports:

“In an effort to learn one new thing to keep my brain active (as is talked about so often these days), and because my cousin who lives in Montana had been after me to learn to send e-mail, I decided to take the computer classes that were being offered at the library. I have learned to send e-mail and have numerous people who respond. And I've also learned a little bit about the Internet and a couple of other things. It has been fun and informative, I'm glad I made the effort.”

To see our current class offerings, visit the Morrill Public Library website at <http://www.hiawathalibrary.org>.