Cultural Programs—The Dallas Public Library

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Because an abundance of group educational activity exists in Dallas, the Dallas Public Library must be highly selective in its program planning. Women’s clubs, retail establishments, civic organizations, universities, churches, junior colleges and business groups offer cultural programs; the public library is generally involved in the planning and presentation of these group services. In defining and delineating its special place in providing cultural services, the public library has learned it must continually examine and assess the offerings of other community groups. Often the success of these varied groups brings much of cultural value to diversified groups of citizens and also brings the library more patronage than if it had itself initiated the activity. In the interests of encouraging and supporting all community efforts for adult education, the library staff tries to define, establish and maintain a unique role for its contributions which will complement and strengthen other services.

What role does the library play in the cultural life of Dallas? We have found our major role to be provision of the program which is often beyond the scope of the organizations mentioned above. While our branch libraries regularly offer programs in art, music and literature in support of special needs and interests of their individual neighborhoods, the three activities detailed below were conceived, planned and presented for city-wide involvement of adults interested in new approaches to continuing education.

These three series, Composers Conferences, Focus on Film programs and Book Shows, required the cooperation of many adult education organizations, involved civic leadership and utilized support of all news media. Each was designed to answer an unfilled community need, to demonstrate library resources so as to make them educationally attractive to the citizens who support the library, and

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to demonstrate the related capabilities and resources of fellow cultural institutions maintained by these same taxpayers.

Composers Conferences have been offered by the Library’s Fine Arts department since 1958. Each conference is designed to provide the audience with the opportunity to hear new music, to provide the composers with an opportunity to hear their compositions performed by professional musicians, and to set up discussion groups in which all can discuss music with panels of respected music critics.

These conferences require extensive planning and cooperative support of all music groups within the Dallas Federation of Music Clubs and of the music press. Volunteers solicit funds for expenses above those provided from the library’s budget. Local universities provide musicians to perform the compositions and the American Federation of Musicians, Local 147, pays a portion of the performance fee for the musicians. Newspaper, radio and television support is excellent.

At each conference, manuscripts have been entered from an average of twenty-five states and three foreign countries. First, these are screened by a committee representing the local music community. Artists whose works are chosen for performance are invited to be present, to hear and to assist in the general discussion. Among the conference moderators have been Paul Creston, Darius Milhaud and Gunther Schuller. The Dallas Symphony Orchestra, conference co-sponsor, performed works of the conference moderators during its regular concerts, thus further integrating the music activities of the library into the mainstream of community cultural services.

These music programs have provided many young musicians with their first opportunity to have works performed in public and have provided citizens of Dallas with an occasion to hear, to question and to learn new trends in music. George Henderson, Head of the Fine Arts Department, says

We feel that the best test of the value of any art is the opportunity to have it presented and to get public reaction to it. This Department has a responsibility to discover and promote new talent in its subject fields. This is done by presenting public programs in cooperation with community organizations, which, in turn, makes the library a part of the responsibility of the co-sponsoring organizations.

While many adult educational organizations consistently present fine music appreciation programs on a regular basis, the library, through these programs, has tried to break new ground on which these other
groups can build future activities. In addition, the library has established a fine community union with another major cultural group, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. In these times of increased competition for the cultural dollar, we have found it mutually beneficial to plan group activities and to act in harmony with such a public organization maintained by and for the people.

Another cultural manifestation is represented by the Focus on Film programs as described by Mrs. Masha Porte, Head of the Audio-Visual Department:

Conceived as an educational and recreational service, “Focus on Film” is intended to acquaint the public with film services, serve as showcase for the collection, and encourage greater appreciation for the film as an art form and a medium of communication. One of the unique qualities of the film is its adaptability to an endless variety of program uses. This versatility enables the planner to fit a film into some preconceived format or program; it may inspire some association heretofore unthought of, or provide an unusual combination of cultural ideas.

There has been no consistent attempt to arrange “book-related” programs, as it is the conviction of the audio-visual staff that the film is a valid independent means of communication, and, though making use of other art forms, is itself a unique vehicle for creative expression. Only two series have been directly book related. The first season in our new building, 1955–56, was called “This is YOUR Library,” and was planned to acquaint the public with the new subject department system. Each month the program featured a different subject department by showing films on subjects in that field and by having the department head speak about his subjects. Then, to commemorate the tenth season of the series, in 1963–64, the theme was “Authors” and the films dealt with Twain, Chaucer, Hemingway, Sandburg, Dickens, W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Robert Louis Stevenson and Hans Christian Andersen.

Although for some seasons a speaker introduced each showing, guest speakers have not usually been responsible for attracting an audience. The event which benefited most from its speaker was the program of Martha Graham dance films, when Aaron Copland, who composed the music for one of them, Appalachian Spring, appeared to talk about his role in this collaboration. Mr. Copland drew an overflow attendance and hundreds were turned away.

Attendance has varied from a low of 15 for a program on community education, to a packed house for Aaron Copland. Other overflow audiences came with showings of such films as Heming-
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way, Mystery of Stonehenge, Shakespeare: Soul of an Age, Red China, and the Chaucer program. As “Focus on Film” developed over the years, attendance has steadily increased and stabilized, with consistent response at or near capacity.

Also flexible from year to year has been the length of the season, with monthly programs varying from six to eleven in the year. Special events in connection with such activities as United Nations Week, National Library Week, and local observances, account for other showings during each year.

Attendance cards are the basis for a mailing list for announcements of film showings which are also sent to public schools, area colleges and universities, and such institutions as the YMCA’s and YWCA’s. As a result of widespread publicity from newspapers, radio, and television, audiences are drawn not only from within the city limits of Dallas, but also from the surrounding suburban communities within a 50-mile radius.

Two ingredients are important to the smooth conduct of the “Focus on Film” series. One is careful planning, from selection of films to scheduling of work deadlines for mailings, posters, press releases and program notes. Secondly, a quality of professionalism in the operation of the program itself lends a sense of occasion to the evening. Informality of dress and programming may best be left to the neighborhood branches. In the central library, an atmosphere of friendly dignity and decorum makes the occasion important.

The thousands who have participated in these programs over the years would attest to Mrs. Porte’s ability to enliven the spirit and enlighten the mind of her audiences.

The third example of this library’s educational programming concerns book-centered activities. In this era of technological change when attention is focused on media other than the book, this staff is committed to the responsibility of demonstrating the power, the beauty and the significance of the written word as a lasting record of man’s thoughts and actions. To do this, we have sponsored major book shows with significant cultural themes.

Made financially possible by the Friends of the Dallas Public Library, three such shows have been staged since 1963. Conceived by the staff, assembled and mounted with the help of appropriate consultants, these exhibits are displayed as attractively as possible and publicized on a broad scale. But the exhibit itself is only the tool for lessons in literature, history and the arts. Docents, trained in the contents of materials on display, lead tours and guide group dis-
cussions. These guides are volunteers from such groups as our Friends; the American Association of University Women; alumnae groups from Smith, Wellesley, and Brandeis; and Business and Professional Women. Each one goes through a training period concerning all phases of the volumes on display, on group reaction, on lecture techniques, and so on. Transportation is provided for students in underprivileged areas, buses pick up senior citizens at Homes, clubs schedule meetings at the library, and art classes visit the exhibits.

Our first book show, “Words That Changed The World,” contained ninety-four rare and irreplaceable volumes. These volumes ranged from the Gutenberg Bible to Marx’s Manifesto of the Communist Party; from Vesalius’ Fabrica to Pope John’s Mater et Magistra; and through Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe and Tolstoy. The first edition of Milton’s magnificent Areopagitica was on display to speak for this library’s stand on censorship. The catalog’s introduction, written by the library’s Director, said:

This Exhibit is a declaration to the words of Western man. It offers a portion of his thoughts through which our world was changed and without which our concepts of living would be vastly different. . . . It seems fitting that a public library, whose doors are open to all, should provide such a remindful display, for words are man’s most democratic cultural heritage. . . . In order that the knowledge of the past and the present may be the inheritance of all in the future, the Dallas Public Library invites young and old, scholar and student, to view and then to read, to agree or to dissent according to his own convictions—for the words on display are the heritage of all people—a heritage upon which man’s thoughts and man’s actions may continue to go forward.

On such great books, this library stands and to such an exhibit came the people to examine and to learn.

The most recent exhibit was staged in tribute to the arts which have made the book a thing of beauty. It was a testimony to the interwoven bonds between the artist, the writer and the designer and was titled “The Arts of the French Book, 1900–1965.”

This subject attracted groups which had not had primary interest in previous shows. Art groups, classes and museum members saw this facet of the library’s concerns. For the average patron, increasingly accustomed to paperbacks and textbooks, this display of beauty and talent within the covers of a book represented an educational experience in itself. Elements of modern bookmaking which produced the
great livre de peintre were emphasized in the display and in lectures. Artists ranged from Delacroix to Braque; books from Manet’s great Le Corbeau to Picasso’s magnificent Les Métamorphoses. Attention was paid to all phases of modern bookmaking, printing, type designing, papermaking, and binding.

Since the book shows are temporary exhibits, the special educational events are planned to relate to permanent values in the community. Speakers present lectures concerning content of volumes on display, highlight local collections which relate to the theme of the exhibit, describe the art of collecting, and so on. Film showings and slide presentations are popular and supplement the lectures. As each book exhibit is dismantled, the staff hopes that respect for the printed word and new avenues of pleasure have been opened to local readers.

These book shows illustrate the responsibility of the library staff to create new ways of reaching readers, of stimulating the senses and of adding stature and respect to the book itself. Attendance at the shows and at the educationally related events attests to the popularity of these group services.

A public library represents the most acceptable and accessible instrument for self education in a community. While this role can be aided by other organizations in the community, opportunities open to the public library for planning, cooperative leadership and the utilization of talents from all walks of life and all interest groups are countless. With clear educational goals based on understanding of the community’s needs, group planning can truly forward group learning.

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