



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“The consensus of our staff and board is that in a small community where resources are limited, it is important that the library is there for everybody.”

-Ann Myren, Director,
Haines Borough Public
Library (HBPL), AK, from
February 1, 2005 *Library
Journal*

I recently had a long telephone conversation with the assistant director of a small rural library. I am interested in rural libraries and always impressed by what they are able to accomplish with their tiny budgets and small staff. This one had particularly limited funds – the annual budget was less than the yearly salary of one full-time librarian in my library system. And yet, they provide library service to their own community, as well as 6 other municipalities. They have a summer bookmobile, summer reading game, storytimes, and regular community programs, such as tax preparation help.

How are they able to do this? One of the ways is low pay for everyone. Another is the staff’s cooperation in making sure every task gets completed. For instance, one of the two part-time staff members – the children’s librarian – is filling in for the director job while they search for someone to take

that position. That cooperation extends to flexible scheduling and what is beautifully described by the word multi-tasking – basically, everyone doing everything.

Libraries like this are everywhere. They struggle to stay open and when they do, it is by using inventiveness, hard work and lots of community support. Francine Fialkoff, editor of *Library Journal*, talks about this in her February 2005 editorial “Small Libraries, Big Impact.” 2005 was the first year for the Best Small Library in America award and she comments on what she calls “the great have-nots of the library world, strapped by small budgets and few employees, isolated by fragile technology and vast distances but vigorously supported by, and supportive of, their residents...They are a study in dedication.” Although one library was ultimately chosen from the 143 libraries nominated, she is impressed by all of them. This award, which is co-

sponsored by *Library Journal* and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, provides the winning library with \$10,000, and travel expenses and registration for up to 2 people to attend the 2006 Public Library Association conference.

John Berry’s article “The Best Small Library in America 2005: Haines Borough Public Library, AK” in this same issue describes the accomplishments of the winning library. The population of Haines is 2600 and yet their budget is \$293,000 – an amazing amount for such a small community. Most of this money comes from property taxes, and the rest comes from various sources of income, such as book sales and donations.

The strength of this library is the ability to work with everyone. Volunteers are a critical part of the daily operation, and there are many programs that involve other agencies. In his book *Fundraising for the*

Small Library, James Swan makes this same point. “The basis of successful fundraising is the community – your community.” One example Swan gives of a small library is the town of McCracken, Kansas, which has a population of 292 and a library operating budget of \$3,000. On the other hand, the town of Ellis, Kansas, has a population of 2,500 and yet it was able to raise \$260,000 in private donations for a new library.

What I love about these rural libraries is how essential they are to the community. Stepping away from the stereotype of a library being simply a building full of books, they provide a critical center for these small communities. By doing so, they help keep a community alive and involved in a world that may be – as in the case of HBPL- “half an hour away by bush plane or three to five hours away by boat.”