At the Library

By Julie Winkelstein
June 13, 2008

"Music needs to be shared, otherwise there is no communication."

-Bill Bell, Jazz Professor,
 at the Albany Library
 June 2, 2008

Every library should have a place to hold programs, whether it is a separate room or simply a cleared area somewhere in the library. The Albany Library's Edith Stone Room is such a place, and each time it is transformed with the simple rearrangement of tables, chairs and perhaps the podium, I am impressed yet again with the irrefutable importance of having a free community meeting space.

Our room gets lots of use almost every day. On a recent Wednesday, I started the day with a morning class visit. Next came a meeting of the Great Books group – adults who reserve the room in advance and meet monthly to discuss a variety of books. After that, the room was set up for the Library's weekly sing-along. Tables were put away, and chairs were arranged so there would be room for the parents, children and strollers that would soon fill the room.

The sing-along was followed by the monthly evening poetry-writing workshop, which uses all 8 tables and all the comfortable chairs. It was as I was contemplating the succession of events that it occurred to me the Edith Stone Room is like a stage. We set it up for the actors, then step back and watch them animate the space. It becomes whatever is needed at the moment – it is flexible and, in a way, without personality, like a bare stage waiting for the scenery and the actors to make it come alive.

I was particularly aware of that a few weeks ago when we held our monthly Brown Bag Speakers Forum. To get the room ready, the chairs were arranged in rows and a microphone was plugged in. However, this time there was an outside addition – I borrowed an electronic keyboard, which was at the front of the room, ready to go. Extra chairs were stacked in the back and by the time the program started, we needed almost every chair in the room.

The presenter was Bill Bell,

jazz expert and retired music professor. A charming and engaging speaker, he began his talk by playing a C major scale on the keyboard and inviting us to sing along. "One, two, three, four..."' we sang, as he played the notes. Then he asked, could we sing it one, two, three, five, six? A bigger challenge, but eventually we all did it in unison and those simple notes became one spiritual after another, as he transformed them into the familiar sounds of songs like "All God's Children Got Shoes" and "Amazing Grace." The room was full of people who may not have known each other, but they knew the words of those old songs.

From there, Bell traced the history of music through jazz, continuing to give musical illustrations along the way. He talked about themes and varia-

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tions, using a Haydn theme as an example. From there came the jazz beats, one two THREE, one two THREE. He had us singing the rhythm, telling us: "You've got to move your body and have both feet on the floor." The room pulsed with laughter, snapping fingers, swaying and singing. And finally, the program ended with Bell playing a song he said he hears a lot in his exercise class, "They Can't Take That Away from Me."

It was a rewarding and exciting event, and as I looked around at the rapt faces in the audience and listened to the applause, it made me proud to work in an institution where free programs like this continue to demonstrate the enduring value of the public library's contribution to its community.

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