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Libraries, rebranded: Upstate facilities embrace new technology along with books

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When Greenville resident Midge Williams was younger, the library was the place to go. But in today's age of technology is the library still a spot for checking out books and doing research?

According to Beverly James, director of Greenville's Hughes Main Library, the answer is absolutely. The library's numbers are increasing both in visitors and circulation. The Greenville County Library System has seen a 10.3 percent increase in library visitors in the past six years.

"It's a typical trend in times of economic downturn," says Beverly James, executive director of Greenville County libraries. "Now people need to save money and instead of buying a book or DVD, they go to the library and borrow it."

The American Library Association says library visits have increased almost three fold since 1990. "They are much more relevant in recent years because of technology," says Emily Sheketoff, executive director of the association's Washington D.C. office.

Both the Greenville and Anderson County libraries offer access to several computers and teach classes on how to use the Internet and other programs. Some of the local libraries have laptops and high-tech meeting areas. You can even log onto the libraries' Web sites at home and use a database, contact a librarian, download audio books, renew your materials or look through an electronic library.

Sheketoff says more than 40 million people rely on libraries for Internet access.

However, people continue to use the library to research things not found on the Internet.

"The Internet is not the answer to everything," says Faith Line, Anderson County library director. "People still need to use reference materials such as databases." And when it comes to doing research for school, most teachers require books for research and not just the Internet.

Greenville County's libraries, with 11 branches, have access to more than 70 databases with information on subjects such as business, literature, science and history. Both libraries also have a South Carolina Room filled with history and information about the state.

And librarians are finding that the more people do research, the more they want to know.

"We're getting more in depth questions," says Marguerite Keenan, director of Easley's Kimberly Hampton Memorial Library. "It used to be basic questions, but now they call and want to know much more detailed information."

One piece of evidence showing the importance of libraries is circulation continues to increase at both Greenville and Anderson County libraries. From 2006 to 2007, Anderson's circulation went up 7.4 percent and Greenville's increased 8.3 percent.

To keep libraries in the forefront of today's society, they are also targeting young readers with different activities and offerings. Anderson County's main library, which just celebrated its 100th anniversary, is trying to attract more teens and is opening a "Teen Room," says Carolyn Davis, a library assistant. After reading a certain amount of books,

teenagers will be able to use the room, which will have a Nintendo Wii and other video games.

Line says typically teenagers stop using the library. "We want to draw them in and have them see what's available. Then maybe they will continue to use it."

At Hughes library, babies, teens and adults are being offered several programs.

There's Musical Jamboree which takes literature and uses song and dance and evening story times. For teenagers, there is a Teenville advisory board to make decisions and plan events. The library recently had an event called "The Amazing Read" for adults in which they read the same book and held panel discussions.

Some may begin comparing the library to a Barnes and Noble, says James. "When we opened in Oct. 2002, we planned to have a coffee shop. Books and coffee go together."

For many, the library is a neutral meeting place for tutoring children. Williams took her 7-year-old son Reid Howard, who likes to read about dinosaurs, to Hughes Main Library to be tutored for reading.

"I don't think young people will be exposed to as much if they don't come to the library," says Williams. "Reading is how we learn. Reading is very, very important."

On a Thursday afternoon, 8-year-old Hannah Burnette, who is being home schooled, was reading stories about animals at the Anderson main library with her mother.

"It's a different atmosphere than at home," says Christy Burnette. "We'll do school work and then get on the computers or find a book related to what we're studying."

Over in Easley, Keenan, who has been the library director for 19 years, wants people to enjoy reading for the fun of it. "Schools have reading for requirements and libraries have a different perspective where reading is fun. We promote the enjoyment of reading," she says.

According to the University of South Carolina Economic Impact Study on South Carolina Public Libraries, more than 60 percent of library users are youths and more than half of the state's citizens have a library card.

Collegiate libraries also are offering new things to students. Now the focus is using them for study groups, which can contribute to a louder library than in the past. USC is even handing out ear plugs.

USC's School of Library and Information Science has seen an increase in students entering its program. The school provides a bachelor's degree in informational science, a master's program and a PhD.

Sam Hastings, director and a professor in the school, says many students go on to be database managers and those wanting a professional library job must have a master's degree.

"We have seen tremendous growth," she says. "With today's electronic devices we have to connect us to information, more people are realizing they need help."

Adam Vorobok, 25, is a student in the School of Library and Information Science and is working on his master's degree.

"I really want to work in public libraries," he says. "I love reading and being of service to people."

Vorobok, who will graduate in May, frequently went to the library as a child and his mother worked in one. "Libraries give a lot to the community and the community is largely dependent on them," he says. "For many it's the only way they can get a hold of

books. Libraries also hold a lot of government records, and it's somewhere people can get together and exchange ideas."

Hastings says, "There is a lot going on beyond books and publishing but it's all still related to information. It's the same mission with new tools."

Completing that mission means help in the funding of libraries.

According to the American Library Association, the bulk of the money comes from local taxes. State aid and private donations also are in the mix. James, with Hughes Library, said they also can apply for grants.

Despite the new technology and other changes, Line says books are not going away.

"If people don't continue to use the library, we'll have a major problem in this county."