

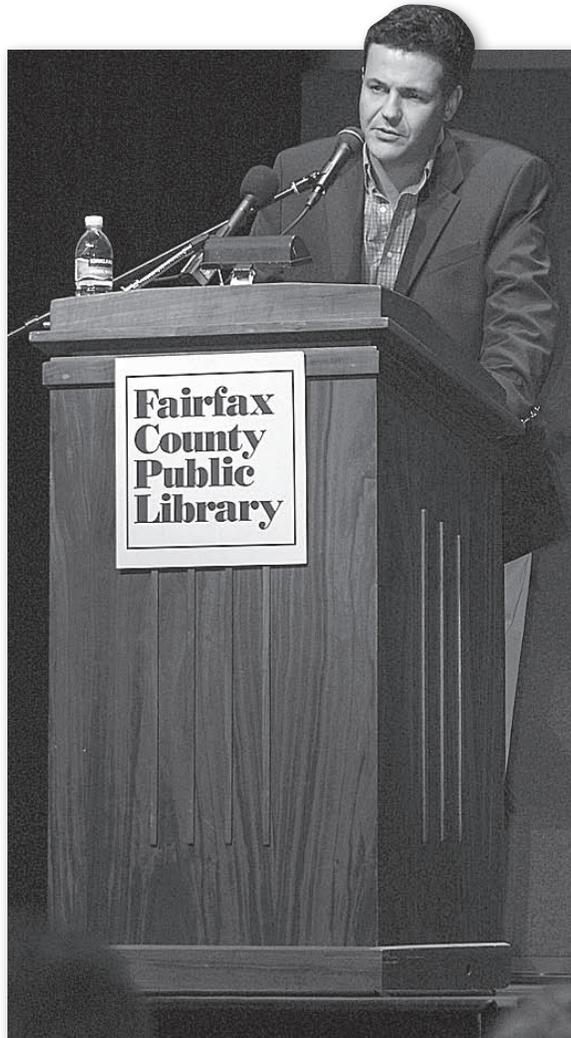
Fairfax County Public Library— Reaching Out to Readers

by Edwin S. Clay III and Patricia Bangs

Last July, just after the new fiscal year began, the collection management and acquisitions coordinator for the Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL) sent an email to all information staff. It read, in part, “FY 2008 was a banner year for FCPL collection use. Use of the hard copy collection went up substantially.... Circulation went over 13,065,309 for the first time.” While the “good news/bad news” message went on to outline some necessary cost-cutting, the 9 percent increase in circulation since FY 2007, much of it printed material, is evidence that reading is alive and well in Fairfax County.

This is no accident. Like most library systems in the state, as well as the entire country, FCPL has had to redefine itself in the wake of all the changes brought about by the digital age. Yet books and reading are still an integral part of our library system’s formula, which also includes an emphasis on online services, as well as promoting library branches as centers for civic engagement.

To connect readers and potential readers with books and authors, the Fairfax County Public Library offers an array of outreach activities through its Early Literacy Outreach program for preschoolers; the Center for the Book, which brings adult programming to the community; All Fairfax Reads, a one-



Khaled Hosseini, author of The Kite Runner, speaks to an overflow crowd of 2,100 Fairfax residents at George Mason University as part of the Fairfax County Public Library’s 2005 All Fairfax Reads initiative.

book/one-community initiative; Fall for the Book, an annual book festival cosponsored by the library; Changing Lives Through Litera-

ture, an alternative sentencing program for offenders in the court system; and BookCast, a bimonthly audio podcast interview with authors posted on the library’s website.

Early Literacy

The library’s Early Literacy Outreach program launched in December 2004. It is designed to teach early literacy skills to preschoolers and their caregivers who cannot, or do not, visit a library. To staff this program, a new position was created. The early literacy manager acts as an outreach extension for each of the library’s twenty-two regular branches. She serves off-site schools, child care centers, community centers, parent groups, and teachers. The program is designed to introduce children, their caregivers, and teachers to the concepts of early literacy, as well as the resources available at their local library branch. The manager also trained a volunteer corps to increase her reach into the community.

The program has three goals: (1) provide preschoolers and care-

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Paul Rusesabagina, subject of the film Hotel Rwanda and savior of thousands of lives during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, signs copies of his book, An Ordinary Man, as part of the library's 2006 Perspectives Series.

givers who could not visit library branches with programs that use the principles of early literacy; (2) model these programs to teachers in preschool settings; and (3) encourage the use of resources in the home or at the library.

At each visit, the early literacy manager, or one of the volunteers, presents and models a story time, often including finger plays, and encourages caregivers to allow youngsters as young as six months to handle books and be read to.

The early literacy manager may visit as many as four locations in one day. Some may have a hundred

preschoolers or more whom she sees in small groups. At each visit, she distributes free picture books to youngsters and their caregivers. Various Friends of the Library groups and individuals have donated funds to buy these books. The library's events calendar and other material publicizing library branch events are also distributed.

After each visit, the early literacy outreach manager reports back to the local library branch manager with the numbers of individuals who attended. She also shares any additional information, such as special community programs where the library might wish to be represented. The manager acts as "the eyes and ears" for the local FCPL library branch in the community, letting people know the array

of programs and services available for preschoolers.

Through the first half of 2008, the early literacy specialist and her corps of trained volunteers, who often include retired public library and elementary school children's librarians, presented 400 programs to more than 8,600 preschoolers and/or their caregivers in an array of nonlibrary settings.

The success of the program can be measured in the comments from groups the early literacy outreach manager has visited. The president of a Mom's Club wrote: "Thank you so much for speaking to our group of stay-at-home mothers. As we raise our little ones, we serve as parents and teachers—your information about literacy and county libraries helped us meet our demanding roles." A library branch manager in a low-income area of the county was thrilled with outreach contacts made: "I just wanted to let you know that your outreach work with Timberlane Elementary School sparked a first-ever request from them to do on-site branch tours with students and parents. We discovered during the tours that many of the parents didn't know we existed at our location, and since many of them spoke Spanish, we're hoping they will come back [the branch offers an extensive Spanish-language collection].... You were very helpful in bridging our contact with them."

Center for the Book

In the late 1990s, the Fairfax County Public Library established the first satellite Center for the Book in the U.S. to be affiliated with a state Center for the Book and the Library of Congress. The activities of the center celebrate the importance of books and reading in the community through literary events, author appearances, discussion series, seminars, and other programs and events related

to books and reading. Most of the programs are funded through partnerships with community organizations, businesses, and universities, as well as the Fairfax Library Foundation. The center is staffed by its director and her assistant.

Outreach is a significant part of the Center for the Book's mission. One of its earliest efforts is Literature and Medicine, a facilitated book discussion group for health professionals, which began in 2002 and is cosponsored by Inova Health System. The group meets four times a year at Fairfax Hospital and includes physicians, nurses, social workers, physical therapists, and others who work for Inova. Books have included *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and others that have themes of interest to those in the health field. Participants complete an evaluation after each session, which includes the question, "Did this discussion help you gain a new perspective that you can use in your professional life?" One respondent replied, "Always—an opportunity to learn through others' experience is a wonderful way to grow, increase respect, and encourage openness and receptivity."

One of the Center for the Book's most successful initiatives is the Perspectives Series each spring, which brings in well-known authors and speakers in an effort to promote civic discourse in the community. The series is cosponsored by the library's foundation and a local community center, which donates funds plus its 350-person theatre, and staffs each event. A local bookstore also provides copies of the speaker's books, and each presentation is followed by a book signing. Well-known participants in the Perspectives Series include former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor; NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell; mystery

writer Sara Paretsky; Julian Bond, chair of the board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Marjane Satrapi, author of *Persepolis*; and many others. The series has attracted more than 3,000 attendees since 2004.

All Fairfax Reads

For the past five years, the library has organized All Fairfax Reads each spring. The one community/one book initiative is modeled on similar programs in other juris-

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dictions nationwide. The book is selected each year by a committee of library staffers and community members and chaired by the director of the Center for the Book. Adult programming is then planned around the book. The first title selected was *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee in 2004. The Center for the Book director organized fourteen programs around the book that year, including a reenactment of the novel's trial scene in the City of Fairfax's old courthouse. Promotional material included 1930s paper fans reminiscent of the book's era.

The second year's selection was *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, and the center was able to arrange an appearance by the author. Originally scheduled for a smaller venue, the program was moved to a local university's theatre and attracted 2,100 attendees, many of whom watched from monitors in the lobby.

The overwhelming popularity

of this author event was noted by Fairfax County's Board of Supervisors' chair, who introduced Hosseini and stayed for the event. Since then, he has been an avid supporter of All Fairfax Reads, writing a letter to the editor each year that is published in a newspaper such as the *Washington Post*. All Fairfax Reads thus reinforced the importance of reading and books to those county leaders responsible for funding, as well as connecting the community with authors.

Other All Fairfax Reads selections have included *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie; *His Excellency: George Washington* by Joseph Ellis during the 400th anniversary celebration of the settling of Jamestown; and the 2008 choice, *The Uncommon Reader* by Alan Bennett. Many of the All Fairfax Reads programs are presented in partnership with other organizations such as George Mason University, or in the case of *His Excellency: George Washington*, Mount Vernon, which is located in Fairfax County.

Fall for the Book

Speaking of partnerships with universities, for the past ten years, the Fairfax County Public Library has been involved in Fall for the Book, a literary festival organized by George Mason University and cosponsored by the library. The director of the Center for the Book serves on the organizing committee to help select participants. Some events are held in library branches; the library's graphic artists design the program and promotional material; and the Fairfax Library Foundation funds the annual Fairfax Prize, a literary prize awarded each year. Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours*, was the award recipient at the 2008 festival. Other participants at this year's festival included Chinua Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*;

Sue Miller, author of bestselling novels including *While I Was Gone*; and the poet C. K. Williams, winner of the National Book Award.

Changing Lives Through Literature

One of the Center for the Book's most unusual partnership programs, Changing Lives Through Literature, began in 2007. It is an alternative sentencing program organized in collaboration with the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Services and the Virginia Department of Corrections, Probation and Parole District 29.

The program is based on a model developed by the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth in 1991, but is one of only two similar programs in the U.S. that are designed and managed by a public library. It may be one of a few such programs that targets teen offenders, as well as adults.

Changing Lives Through Literature is an alternative to formal court action for Fairfax County offenders, using the power of literature to transform lives through reading and group discussion. The alternative sentencing program consists of a demanding book discussion group that meets over a series of weeks and involves reading, reflecting, sharing, and contact with stable members of the community and their values.

Each group consists of a facilitator, a probation or intake officer, and six to twelve offenders, all of whom must participate in discussions. Since 2007, FCPL and its partners have organized six groups: one adult women's group, three juvenile girls' groups, one juvenile boys' group, and one men's group. Some of the books selected include *Speak* by Laurie Anderson, *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson, poetry including "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes, and *Hole in My Life* by Jack Gantos. The funding

for books, journals, and a facilitator's fee are provided through gift funds to the library, either from Friends of the Library book sales, donations to the Fairfax Library Foundation, and grants.

The participating probation officers and court personnel are impressed with the success of the program and have asked for twenty-eight groups in the next fiscal year if funding could be found. The sessions have worked because each offender's opinion is valued and the participants have time to reflect on literature and

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life experiences. The discussions help offenders realize they are not alone in their feelings, and it gives them an opportunity to disagree with authority. There is also safety when speaking about the characters in the story, rather than their own experiences.

Some of the comments from teenage girl offenders who participated in a group included, "I learned that I need to make better decisions, thinking them through more." Another said, "I learned that people are very similar in the basics." A third wrote, "Don't hold things in and let it build up. Speak to someone about it." Still another wrote, "I learned how things always prove themselves to be just not worth it and that people can change." A program such as this demonstrates that books and reading may offer life lessons to

a population that might not have experienced the insights into life's complexities that books and reading offer.

BookCast

BookCast is a podcast project launched in the fall of 2006. The library was interested in experimenting with podcast technology and designed a series of interviews with local authors and more well-known program speakers with Library Director Sam Clay.

The project required several months of planning, but now that it has been established, the series runs smoothly and involves the library director and three staffers: a communications specialist who coordinates the program and edits the podcasts using a sound editing software program called Pro-paganda; a technical person who sets up the equipment for either an in-person or phone interview and processes the raw interview file; an Internet Services staffer who posts the podcast on podblaze.com, which includes adding the news feed, and creates the associated webpage files; and an audio technician who maintains the equipment. The interviews take place in a conference room and usually last fifteen to twenty minutes. Local authors are excited about the exposure, and we often interview authors who will be giving programs at a local library branch to promote their appearances. The authors in turn link from their websites to their interviews on the library's BookCast page. The library has also arranged phone podcast interviews with more well-known authors and speakers such as Alexander McCall Smith, author of *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series, and Julian Bond, civil rights activist and chair of the board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Since the series began, the library has posted more than

Renee Edwards, the Fairfax County Public Library's current early literacy outreach manager, poses with early readers at a Fairfax County Head Start program (right) and engages a class of young readers at a Fairfax County elementary school (below).



forty-five interviews with mystery and romance writers, nonfiction writers, children's poets, and local historians.

The director of the library's Internet Services has worked with the Fairfax Library Foundation to solicit corporate sponsors to provide funds for the project, including additional bandwidth, which was required as more podcasts were added and the number of listeners increased. Over the past year, the

number of BookCast downloads has increased 33 percent with a total of almost 12,000 since the project began. The BookCast series can be found at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library/BookCast.

The system-wide initiatives mentioned above support more than 3,000 programs held each year in FCPL's twenty-three branches. In addition to numerous programs for preschoolers and early readers, there are book discussion

groups for grade-schoolers, teens, and adults; local author presentations; and much more. The key to our success has been actively recruiting partners in the community, whether nearby universities, other educational institutions, or businesses. Once the community is involved, making connections between readers and books becomes much easier.

In the era of the Kindle and Google's book digitization project, there is much speculation in the media on the future of books and reading. Whatever form literature takes in the decades to come, a commentator in the *Economist* may have said it best: "Books are not primarily artefacts, nor necessarily vehicles for ideas. Rather, as Mr. Godin puts it, they are 'souvenirs of the way we felt' when we read something. That is something that people are likely to go on buying" ("The Future of Books: Not Bound by Anything," March 22, 2007).

And, we might add, borrowing. Libraries exist in part to help people make such emotional connections with what they read. Reaching out to readers is a significant role for our institutions as the art of reading takes on new forms, but retains old meanings for its practitioners. **VI**