

OPENERS

Possibilities Evolve

by Cy Dillon and Lyn C. A. Gardner

As I write this column to introduce a special issue on electronic collections and digital developments in the library world, Hampton Public Library is avidly following the developments in e-book lending for public libraries. We're both anxious and excited by the rapid-fire changes in the way these resources will be served and whether, in some cases, they'll be available (or affordable) at all. Between the recession and technological changes in the way many people read and absorb both entertainment and information, it seems at times as though what's at stake is not just the e-book format—and the circulation we hope will accompany it—but the survival of the print medium itself, with traditional publishing and the corner bookstore both struggling with increasing desperation. And as ever more journals and professional communications go digital—and some university libraries abolish their physical reference collections—is the demise of print finally near at hand? As a passionate reader, librarian, and creative writer, I hope this is not the case. I hope instead that the shifting digital landscape will reawaken everyone's love for the book. That more and more people will seek out the library as a desired one-stop destination for relaxation, discovery, or study, the way I do in each new city I visit. That in our changing economy and culture, one constant will remain the availability of information and entertainment for the

good of constituent populations, with libraries uniquely designed to serve each populace. In the best of all worlds, the new possibilities offered by technology should be a creative enhancement, complementing rather than threatening the way we do business.

I remember being tickled on a recent flight when I was seated next to a fellow reader. I held a yellowed science fiction paperback,

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supplemented by my trusty spiral notebook for scribbling my ideas; my neighbor had an e-reader that, when closed, displayed the portrait of William Faulkner. Here we were, two readers at two ends of the technological spectrum, both enjoying the pleasures of the written word. I was delighted. Yet when the plane took off, my companion was forced to switch off his electronic device and resort to a snooze, while I kept reading. There are certainly many places where I'd personally find it more comfortable to hold a physical book than an e-reader—in bed or in the bath, walking in the sun, stopped in traffic, or stealing stray moments to read just a paragraph at a time. But during Hurricane Irene, while far from home and

fearing the worst, I wished I had digital backups of all my photographs and papers—and that I had taken the time to type or scan my copious handwritten drafts. And with all my recent traveling, a single device to hold all my books would be a godsend.

As Sam Byrd reminds us in his article on the digitization of historical documents, the possibilities for presenting information available to librarians are constantly changing, and new environments—physical or online—present both new challenges and new opportunities to serve our communities. The contents of this issue should convince our readers that Virginia is rich in libraries and library staff who are focused on the positive potential of this inevitable evolution.

It is nothing short of inspiring to learn how libraries have addressed projects ranging from using social media to best advantage to digitizing and organizing collections of important historical documents of many kinds to managing electronic collections to using open-source software and other free online tools to overcoming budget limitations to provide downloadable e-books for public library patrons. The combination of dedication, optimism, and creativity readers will discover in these pages is particularly commendable when the economy is still recovering and government as well as private funding is still limited by the effects of the worst downturn since the Great Depression.

The variety of community and institutional needs addressed by the projects our writers describe is an indication that the expectations society has for libraries continue to increase in intensity and scope as our users take advantage of the information sources we provide. That is, the better we are, the better we have to become. The words and syntax are simple, but they are not meant to be comforting. Dedication, optimism, and creativity all require the kind of effort that comes only with a commitment to serve and the faith that service matters. We hope these examples of success will help you muster that faith as you respond to the needs of your community.

VLA President Connie Gilman also addresses possibilities in her first President's Column. The Strategic Plan that she includes in her article is a challenging set of objectives for our association and for us as individual members. Just as the information environment has evolved, the challenges facing us as the voice of libraries in Virginia have become ever more numerous and difficult. Knowing what we want to accomplish and the steps required for those accomplishments is essential. With the plan in place, it is time, as Connie says, to "roll up our sleeves and make our strategic goals a reality."

It is difficult to say goodbye. I have loved every aspect of this work. I will miss working with our writers and having this chance to share ideas with colleagues. I'm shy by nature and in addition to everything else, *Virginia Libraries* provided a wonderful opening for conversation and correspondence. Most of all, I will miss this chance to contribute to VLA in the best way I know how, using skills it has been a pleasure to exercise on your behalf. Thank you for giving me this chance, and best wishes to all of you as we make our way into the future. **VL**

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