

THE HUMAN TOUCH

San Francisco Public Library
is the 2018 Gale/LJ Library of the Year
By John N. Berry III

A model and inspiration for public libraries worldwide, the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL)—with its committed staff, transformational leadership, amazing array of programs, partnerships, popularity, and community connections—is the 2018 Gale/LJ Library of the Year. SFPL's aggressive yet compassionate approach and the resulting services, outreach, alliances, and innovation offer new directions public libraries everywhere can apply to their services.

“SFPL's overall impact on its community is obvious as it creates exceptional programs touching all parts of the city's diverse population. The size and scope of services is a tour de force of what library programming aspires to,” writes award judge Kent Oliver, director, Nashville Public Library, the 2017 Gale/LJ Library of the Year.

ALL ARE WELCOME

Inclusion has long been a focus at SFPL, but it gained new urgency in the current political climate, something from which the leadership doesn't shy away. “The day after the 2016 election we had our Future of the Library Forum meeting. [Then-director] Luis Herrera recognized that people in the room were hurting. We discarded the agenda we had prepared and had a dialog with the staff. ‘What are we going to do in the library to address equity in our community? How can we be more inclusive?’ were the questions discussed,” says Acting City Librarian Michael Lambert.

John N. Berry III is Editor-at-Large, LJ



From that dialog, SFPL formed its Immigrant Services Task Force, which in turn quickly developed a slate of programs. The SFPL All Are Welcome initiative was born, providing information on how to settle in the United States, how to learn or improve English proficiency, how to become a citizen, and other critical resources, delivered in six languages and via YouTube video. The initiative's “Know Your Rights” program has been a smash hit, and SFPL has joined with the city's Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs, which calls the library “a critical partner,” plus an immigration law firm,

to give one-on-one advice on citizenship applications. The library also offers workshops on how to become an ally to immigrants. A Respect and Love toolkit and resource guide addresses issues of bias and discrimination.

GRAPPLING WITH RACE

SFPL is taking steps to address racial injustice internally and externally alike. According to Lambert, the two are intertwined. “We want to do a better job of serving impacted communities in San Francisco, and we want all SFPL staff to go through [anti]bias training. These efforts will improve our recruiting from communities of color and make the SFPL workforce even more reflective of the city,” he says.

SFPL's librarian at the African-American Center Shawna Sherman and the Community Engagement manager Alejandro Gallegos just joined the Government Alliance for Racial Equity. They will lead an effort to develop a Racial Equity Plan for SFPL this year.



INNOVATION IN ACTION AT SFPL. (Top row l.–r.): Youth services manager Christy Estrovitz and early learning coordinator Maricela Leon-Barrera doing outreach; free haircuts courtesy of Pop-Up Village Care; the North Beach Lib.; the teen-designed space The Mix.



(Middle row): The Bridge Learning Center's Veterans Resource Center; SFPL's leadership team partnered with SFMOMA to restore a historic scale model of the city. (Clockwise) Michael Liang, chief of information technology; Mark Hall, assistant chief of Main; Mindy Linetzky, manager, communications & public affairs; Omar Castillo, safety and security manager; Roberto Lombardi, facilities director; Michelle Jeffers, chief of community programs & partnerships; Randle McClure, chief analytics officer; Michael Lambert, acting city librarian; Stella Lochman, SFMOMA associate curator; Maureen Singleton, chief of finance; Shellie Cocking, chief of collections & technical services; Elicia Epstein, SFMOMA education assistant; and Cathy Delneo, chief of branches; SFPL's Tech Expo.

(Bottom row, l.–r.): The atrium at the Main Library; African American Center librarian Shawna Sherman (2d from r.) and community engagement manager Alejandro Gallegos (r.) inside the African American Center. They will lead development of SFPL's Racial Equity Plan.

To help patrons address these issues, SFPL designed a new four-part series of programs to help parents, educators, and caregivers discuss race with youngsters. Participants were given tools to address race, racism, inequity, and injustice, and practiced conversations with and for kids on how to nurture racial justice. Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden joined the program to introduce a workshop for families and educators.

EMBEDDED IN OFFERINGS

SFPL excels at incorporating its equity mission into all of its programming. Last year's Digital Inclusion Week, for example, worked with more than 20 organizations to bridge the digital divide. (This year it has been renamed Connecting with Tech Week.) SFPL also allied with Radar Productions to present the first Drag Queen Story Hour in the nation in 2015. Many libraries have since tried these programs; SFPL has expanded Drag Queen Story Hour to branches outside of the traditionally LGBTQIA neighborhoods.

For its version of the One City, One Book program, in 2017 SFPL chose Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr.'s *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Univ. of California). More than 700 people participated in over 20 author talks, bike tours, film screenings, panel discussions, and other activities. More than 1,200 patrons checked out the book.

In 2017, SFPL launched "We Love Diverse Books," more than 50 programs featuring titles that counteract stereotypes and showcase the array of cultures in books, including the Black Comix Arts Festival, cultural cooking classes, book-making, and poetry workshops. Authors and artists shared stories.

Every year programs created by SFPL's Cultural Awareness Committee (CAC) highlight multiple themes across all ages and communities. Recent programs included Middle Eastern Heritage, Pride! SF, Made in SF, Asian Pacific Heritage, VIVA! Latino/Hispanic Heritage, LIVE! at the Library, and for more than a month Black History, Culture, and Heritage.

SFPL wasn't the only literary organization in San Francisco city to feel the 2016 presidential election as a wake-up call. Chief of community programs and partnerships Michelle Jeffers tells how an organization called Litquake, an SFPL partner for 20 years on author visits, writing workshops, and similar events, decided to bring authors into SFPL to engage people who felt the impact of the election.

"Litquake wanted to find new ways to make their voices heard. Cutting-edge programs were created and brought to SFPL every other month. We discussed how many voices were being excluded, and we started the SFPL 'No Shadow Without Light' Series," Jeffers reports. "It grew really fast, there was such an outpouring of interest in hearing from

these writers and having a free venue and welcome for them. They were noted voices on immigration, women's rights, and environmental issues."

ENRICHING AND SAVING LIVES

In 2009, as collaborator with the Department of Public Health, SFPL placed a social worker in the library—the first U.S. public library to do so. Nearly a decade later, the social worker is augmented by a social service team of a leader and six health and safety associates (HASAs), many of whom have been homeless. They serve all patrons who need assistance, especially the indigent, homeless, or those living with mental illness, chronic health issues, or substance abuse. HASAs get peer counseling and training and grow in their new careers working with others. The team has partnered with community organizations such as Project Homeless Connect and Lava Mae, a nonprofit that provides mobile showers in front of the Main Library every week, and says its "work with the library embodied our highest hopes." SFPL hosts a monthly Pop-Up Care Village outside the Main Library, providing food, clothing, backpacks, health care, haircuts, showers, and more to about 350 people. They offer referral services to homeless patrons every day. More than 6,500 people got resources from HASAs last year. Since 2010, 150 people have been placed in permanent housing with help from SFPL.

SFPL frontline staff asked management to have SFPL stock Narcan and give them training on its use to save lives. More than 120 employees have completed the voluntary training. In February, SFPL staff administered Narcan and saved the lives of two patrons.

"Having to face tough urban issues like homelessness and the opioid epidemic has redefined the collaborative and expansive role that libraries play in spearheading social policy," says Lambert.

A MUSEUM LIBRARY BRANCH

While the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) was closed for renovation 2013–16, it was doing what was called "the museum on the move, the museum on the go," pop-up exhibitions in other cultural institutions in the city, according to Jeffers. SFPL was one participant, hosting what Jeffers calls "this cool nontraditional exhibit" on a South African music festival from 1957.

"It was a great partnership, and we loved working with them," says Jeffers. "SFMOMA found that working with SFPL made a point they wanted to emphasize, that museums often feel so exclusive they don't reach all sectors of the community. They saw that SFPL was a place that attracted people from the entire community [and] wanted to continue a partnership" even after the renovation was complete.

SFPL's community engagement would bring more visibility to the museum. SFPL hoped the connection would bring more visibility to the library. When SFMOMA reopened it included a space for what was called a current education center. It's a big open room, and SFPL folks joked that it would make a great branch. Now the joke has come true: there are SFPL programs, a collection of books, a spot where people can hang out with records to listen to, even a piece of SFPL's Julia Morgan–designed card catalog. SFPL's SFMOMA branch is busy now.

LIBRARY OF THE YEAR 2018 SPECIAL MENTION

CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY

BRIAN BANNON | COMMISSIONER & CEO

The Chicago Public Library (CPL) is consistently one of the top exemplars in the United States, and it is no coincidence that CPL appears here as a special mention for the second year in a row. Like winner SFPL, where Chicago CEO Brian Bannon (a 2009 *LJ* Mover & Shaker) cut his teeth as chief of branches, Chicago's story is



marked by expanded hours, branch renovations, and field-leading innovations that have gone on to see wide adoption, perhaps most famously the YouMedia

teen space, now nationally replicated under Institute of Museum & Library Services funding, and the design thinking toolkit that CPL developed with Denmark's Aarhus Library and groundbreaking design firm IDEO.

Newer innovations perhaps headed for a similar fate include Learning Circles, built with Peer 2 Peer University, which pair massive open online courses (MOOCs) with in-person support from peers and staff facilitators, leading to a dramatic retention rate three to five times that of a purely online course, and an ambitious, STEAM-focused summer learning challenge that combines massive scale with rigorous documentation of impact.

As with SFPL, partnerships are deeply embedded in CPL's model of innovation, both inside libraryland, via communities of practice, and outside it with the MacArthur and Knight foundations and many more. This deeply collaborative approach inspired MIT's Media Lab to create the Public Library Innovation Exchange and particularly impressed judge Felton Thomas, who cited "their stated and shown commitment to sharing their best practices nationally and internationally." One of CPL's newest partners is also the most exciting: see News+, p. 10, for CPL's plans to open a branch inside Chicago's forthcoming Obama Presidential Center, itself an innovative and unusual take on a presidential library.

EXHIBITS FOR DIVERSITY

SFPL doesn't only have a piece of the library in the museum, it also continues to have a little bit of museum in the library. Though the SFMOMA pop-up is gone, two full art galleries in the Main Library get heavy use, and there is broad interest in exhibitions and displays throughout the branches. The library develops exhibitions that highlight library resources but also illuminate the diverse communities and interests of San Francisco and tie into themes developed by the SFPL CAC. Recent exhibitions include an annual wit and humor show taken from a unique special collection to multiple photography displays that have highlighted Palestinian immigrants, nationally recognized poets, and homeless residents. The library often joins with local artists and community organizations, providing a venue where they can showcase their work. Over the past two years, two exhibitions created by SFPL and its partners have traveled to other museums and libraries: an exhibit on the impact of climate change on wildflowers and a show highlighting native Ohlone elders and youth.

CULTIVATING CULTURE

The SFPL story begins with the transformational leadership of City Librarian Luis Herrera, the 2012 *LJ* Librarian of the Year, who retired this past February after 13 years.

"I feel as though I've had an Ivy League education working with Luis Herrera. Luis was a transformational leader. He created an amazing culture of service and innovation here, but it is also a family culture for the staff. We care about one another, and we celebrate each other," Lambert says. Herrera's legacy includes collaboration with the union, a relationship that can elsewhere be adversarial. The effectiveness of SFPL's innovations at meeting community needs is measured by an in-house analytics team headed by a chief analytics officer, itself an innovation.

"We have an incredible talent pool at SFPL," Lambert continues. "Four years ago we set out to be the premier urban library in the country, and our staff have bought in. We launched an initiative called Service Excellence, and every staff member, custodian, page, security staff, our librarians, our managers, everybody goes through service excellence training. People have committed themselves to the patron focus service model, and they have committed to being a safe and welcoming library, a preferred destination [for] all San Franciscans," says Lambert proudly.

That welcome is anything but one-size-fits-all. Susan Hildreth, who served as San Francisco city librarian prior to Herrera and, after a stint running the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is now professor of practice at the University of Washington iSchool, cites several offerings tailored to the needs of specific patron populations. "Over the last several years, many new services have been developed including the Bridge at Main, an adult literacy and learning center located at the Main Library featuring a computer lab, technology classes, and a veteran's resource center...the Deaf Services Center, the Library for the Blind, and mobile and homebound services through the Library on Wheels." A recent innovation allows hospital patients to access library materials without coming in for a card.

Another underserved population SFPL is addressing is children who need extra help with reading. SFPL is the

LIBRARY OF THE YEAR 2018 SPECIAL MENTION

CUYAHOGA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY, OH

SARI FELDMAN | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL) has long been known as a model of library service. But, as judge Julie Todaro says, "Although Cuyahoga has had a reputation for transformation and meeting community needs, its vast resources have driven—in many people's minds—the existence, delivery, and success of services." While the



system is well supported, however, many librarians may not know that doesn't mean the community is affluent. As it turns out, nearly half of all workers in Cuyahoga

County—some 44 percent—have literacy skills far below the national standard. As a result, says judge Kent Oliver, "CCPL is laser-focused on adult education, workforce development, and literacy."

Over the last year, CCPL has emphasized ramping up services to serve job seekers better, launching a Benefits Navigator partnership with the county's Job & Family Services department to help adults with limited digital skills and access successfully get the help to which they are entitled. In turn this lets the library connect them to other library services, particularly GED/high school equivalency prep. The library's new Families Learning Together program allows parents to study for a GED for free while their kids take part in literacy and art activities. CCPL's CuyahogaWorks Job & Career Service is staffed by counselors and coaches who help with résumés, search strategies, and interview preparation, plus office hours from the local county workforce board. In 2016, 68 percent of those helped by the service got a job within three months. Through the Aspire Greater Cleveland program, the library connects to local employers to provide training, such as ESOL for hotel housekeeping and maintenance staff and food production workers. The Key Advanced Entrepreneurs program, in partnership with a local bank, helps those who want to start their own business. Meanwhile, a complementary focus on family engagement, early literacy, STEM, and grade-level reading help prepare the next generation for success.

first public library in the country to hire a learning differences librarian, who is developing a program of one-on-one tutoring and reading remediation called FOG (Free Orton-Gillingham) Readers.

DIVERSITY OF BOOKMOBILES

According to Mindy Linetzky, SFPL's manager of communications and public affairs, the four libraries on wheels Hildreth mentioned visit more than 60 locations, providing library service to schools, senior centers and residences,

day-care centers, community and cultural events, and even Treasure Island, located in San Francisco Bay between the two sections of the Oakland Bay Bridge. SFPL has also put its own unique twist on the mobile outreach vehicle with the environmentally friendly SFPL Green Bookmobile, which runs on 20 percent biodiesel and is specially equipped with four solar panels, Fantastic Vents for green AC, skylights for natural light, sustainably forested wood, carpets containing recycled content, and a hybrid generator. The fleet also includes an early literacy mobile and one focused on seniors.



TEENS TAKE THE STAGE A performance program at the teen-designed The Mix

TEENS IN “THE MIX” & STRONG SUPPORT

Another target population for SFPL is teens. Many libraries have teen advisory boards, but few of them take it as far as SFPL, which allowed its teens to design not only programs but the space that houses them. “The Mix” at SFPL, launched in 2015, “was their vision,” says Lambert. “Architects worked with the SFPL Board of Advising Youth and came up with the conceptual design and programs and services they wanted. We repurposed prime space.... It has transformed the space and the experience. There’s a Maker space, audio booths, and a video production studio. There is a performance garden, beautiful books, and all kinds of comfortable seating where the young can study, chat, or just hang out. There are computers where they can edit their content and then showcase that content on the SFPL website.”

LIBRARY OF THE YEAR 2018 JUDGES

LJ thanks the following individuals who volunteered their valuable time to help select the 2018 Library of the Year:

KENT OLIVER | Director, Nashville Public Library;
2017 Gale/LJ Library of the Year

BRIAN RISSE | VP–Public Library, Wholesale,
& Large Print Sales, Cengage Learning

FELTON THOMAS JR. | Executive Director, CEO, Cleveland
Public Library; Past President, Public Library Association

JULIE TODARO | Dean of Library Services, Austin Community
College, TX; Past President, American Library Association

LANCE WERNER | Executive Director, Kent District Library, MI;
2018 LJ Librarian of the Year

The panel also includes LJ’s **Matt Enis**, **Rebecca T. Miller**, **Kiera Parrott**, **Lisa Peet**, and **Meredith Schwartz**

LJ editor panelists select up to six finalists from among the total pool of entries and invite external judges to participate, including one representative from Gale Cengage Learning, the award’s sponsor; the judges each choose their first-, second-, and third-place candidates from that field and convey their vote to the coordinating LJ editor. Each vote is assigned a corresponding point value, and each vote is given equal weight. The cumulative totals determine each year’s award winner and honorable mentions; any ties are broken by LJ editors.

2007, it must again be renewed in 2023.

“We’ll be gearing up with our Friends and Foundation to embark on a new campaign to get that renewal very soon. We even hope in the next round that we’ll have a longer time,” Lambert reports.

The result is an annual SFPL budget of \$126 million, or \$144 per capita. About 65 percent of the budget covers the cost of 872 staff, of which 30.3 percent are professional librarians. More than 11 percent of the budget goes for materials and collections, which last year drove a 6.33 percent increase in circulation.

Says Herrera of this award, “The support from the people of San Francisco was what made this possible. Even in difficult economic times, they put their money where their mouth is.... The people of the community knew and expected that when needs arise, the libraries come to the fore.”

And so they did. Says author Dave Eggers, “The SFPL is nimble, creative, and always inclined to find a way to make things happen. They always say yes first, then find a way. I love them for that.”

THE CASE FOR SFPL

Comments from judge Julie Todaro, past president of the American Library Association and dean of library services at Austin Community College in Texas, sum up why SFPL deserved to win this award: “With a strong focus on employees and partnerships, SFPL exemplifies best practices.... They present a number of firsts in their program design and delivery (the first social work librarian, unique story time performers) and have taken many risks. SFPL has excelled at hiring and training staff who focus on expanding what libraries “do” and illustrated how libraries who can’t afford these hires can focus on these areas, for example, ‘learning differences librarian.’ The impact is broad and deep.

“Many of their ‘firsts’ have already inspired the profession to look differently at what they do and, most important, what they *can* do.”

That, says Herrera, was the point. “Our work was very intentional. We wanted to create a model urban library. We wanted to demonstrate what the library of the future would look like. We learned that it always has to be a work in progress.” We look forward to seeing the progress still to come. ■

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