

2008 Buffalo & Erie County Public Library State of the Library

Welcome everyone, thank you for joining me this morning for the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library's 2008 State of the Library address.

On a recent trip to the State Library in Albany, I was given an envelope containing a de-accessioned copy of their 1944 Grosvenor Library Bulletin, the Grosvenor Library's annual report for 1943-1944. As you may know, the Grosvenor Library was one of the predecessors of B&ECPL, joining with the Buffalo Public Library and the Erie County Library in 1963 to form the organizational framework of our current Library System.

What struck me about this slim report, besides its elegant yet austere design, was how similar the issues faced by the Library System of 2008 are to the Grosvenor Library issues of 1944 – more than half a century later. My predecessor, and author of the GL report, Acting Librarian Julian Park noted, “The American library has long ceased to be merely a collection of books. Here books are tools, they must spring to life and service.”

Today, we continue to take our role as a service provider very seriously. Service is at the heart of our existence. Public libraries are the only public institutions that guarantee free and open access to anyone throughout their entire lifetime. You don't have to apply, qualify, join, be nominated or pay to walk through our doors and use the vast array of collections and programs. You can stay all day, and visit as often as you like. A simple process enables you to leave the building with materials for use in your home or workplace. And, public libraries are the only institutions that enable and promote a wide range of free life-long learning opportunities after the public educational systems complete their missions.

Mr. Park also wrote about the Grosvenor Library's role in meeting new obligations and changing community needs based on changes in the social circumstances of their post-war environment. He stressed the need for non-traditional library services such as vocational education, and stressed the importance of guaranteeing access to knowledgeable, approachable and friendly staff, to materials that are “...easily and immediately available...”, and to dispel the notion that libraries are aloof and only for the privileged classes. “Democracy has flourished where popular libraries have been encouraged.” His words ring true today for there is no nation in the world that encourages its population to be so well informed and to share information so freely – accessible to all through their public library. How fortunate a society we are that libraries are so ubiquitous they are often taken for granted. Public libraries are the cornerstone of an informed society.

Indeed, these tenets of public library service remain the same, even as our collections and technology change before our eyes.

Today at B&ECPL we still face similar challenges related to societal circumstances. In Erie County, and the City of Buffalo in particular, we face alarming rates of illiteracy, below basic literacy rates, poverty, unemployment and underemployment. Indicators for improvement are incredibly encouraging and provide needed hope and inspiration, but as an institution with a mission to educate, enlighten and inform, we have an obligation to contribute to the

solution of these serious problems. What is our most pressing societal issue? I would argue it is literacy.

As all of us are painfully aware, the City of Buffalo is among the country's poorest cities with a population of more than 250,000. We also know that poverty and low income are closely linked with low literacy rates among adults, and are key factors contributing to a lack of school readiness and school success among youth. Literacy, therefore, is an especially critical issue in our community. But it's not just the City: Erie County has a disturbingly high functional illiteracy rate of 20 percent. That's not thousands or even 10's of thousands; it's hundreds of thousands.

You have heard these statistics before, it's not breaking news. What is new is the Library System's commitment to this issue. One of the Library's primary goals and initiatives for 2008 -2009 is to assist in improving literacy rates in our community and develop a comprehensive plan of action for the future of literacy services in our county. Libraries and literacy go hand in hand.

The Library has a history in providing literacy services: story times, book talks, summer reading programs. Our pre-school and school age literacy programs have become synonymous with basic library programs: libraries = literacy. But we can, and should do more. What about adults that can't read or read as well as they need to thrive? How can we, through public library initiatives, help them to bring the reading and learning process full circle in their families and their communities? How can we expand our realm of influence and services for preschool learning and after school assistance? And how can we most effectively work with all the other dedicated agencies providing a broad range of literacy services?

We are off to a great start in expanding literacy services throughout our geographically diverse Library System. We all know that early reading and educational success begins when parents and caregivers read to their children. We are providing additional preschool story hours throughout the system, and working with the Community Foundation's Good Schools For All/Read to Succeed initiative to bring services to the East Delavan Library Branch. We hope to enlist future assistance from Good School's to expand offerings at more City branches. We are working with a broad range of people and organizations and within our own system to develop a plan with our suburban and rural libraries to bring services to our entire county.

We are in a unique position to help with 37 facilities throughout the county. We have established relationships with the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo, Project Flight, Literacy Volunteers, Just Buffalo Literary Center and the Buffalo Book Fair just to name a few, and look to strengthen ties with local schools and institutions of higher learning and other organizations— all have a keen interest in improving literacy rates. It's a goal our entire community should share.

Our business community will directly benefit from these efforts as a more literate workforce provides additional available qualified workers. A recent study by the Urban Libraries Council shows how important literacy rates are in improving overall economic development

and workforce development. This informative and well researched report is available at this library, and will be consulted frequently as we fine tune our literacy projects.

No organization can afford to be an island upon, or within, itself. Great things happen when many voices join in collaboration – this is where synergy comes into play. Our combined efforts are greater than any single act, and make a greater impact. As with our emerging literacy initiative, we look for partners when considering any project, we seek advice and counsel and create alliances. New collaborative ventures have recently resulted in exciting new system-wide programs and projects and synergistic relationships are building and growing – on a daily basis it seems!

The two-year, multi-agency Get Graphic grant led by B&ECPL has created a tremendous opportunity for the Library System to attract a more diverse and engaged audience for programs and collection use, and created professional relationships between library staff and colleagues in neighboring counties and organizations. These relationships will serve us well for projects and initiatives in future years.

Schools and students are a primary target audience for Get Graphic, and we want to keep those students, particularly ‘tweens and teens, thinking of the library as a destination. The Central Library is reopening our Teen Center, and we are continuing our discussions with schools, teachers and media specialists about ongoing ventures the public school and public library can embark upon together.

We are introducing a new collaborative endeavor with the Museum of Science called Branched Out. Museum staff will offer a regular schedule of programs in many of our City Branch Libraries, bringing science educational opportunities to our city and county’s children and families. Branched Out programs for the fall include, *Brainy Beings*, *What If You Dunit* (a crime scene investigation program in conjunction with The Big Read), and *Living with Lungs*. Explore and More Children’s Museum has been offering programs in many of the county libraries throughout the year. Book discussions, music programs, author visits, history programs – your libraries are alive and buzzing with activity.

WBFO 88.7FM continues to be a key partner and was instrumental in bringing NPR’s StoryCorps mobile recording studio to the front lawn of the Central Library through July and August. Stories from Buffalo air regularly on WBFO and WNPR. We are very excited about our second project, Meet The Author Lunchtime Library Series, held at Fables Café. Two sessions of the series have been recorded live and the next is scheduled for October 31st. Come have lunch and listen to a wonderful discussion between WBFO’s Bert Gambini and interesting authors from around the country. Speaking of Fables Café, did you know that they recently were awarded best downtown lunch destination by Buffalo Spree magazine?

The Big Read is coming – please stay after my remarks for the kickoff of this exciting month long program series. There will be events related to the Big Read (and the Little Read, and the Littlest Read) in every one of our system’s libraries. This is truly a collaborative endeavor that will promote the fun of reading and the community building opportunity a one-book initiative can have in a region. This broad-reaching program is a model for cooperative

program planning and production among our libraries – and makes the most of our strength as a system.

We have been working with the Uncrowned Community Builders to introduce an exciting project at the Frank Merriweather Library – the launch will be on October 4th, and will create an entirely new way for Buffalo to record and document her rich cultural and ethnic history. We are working with Just Buffalo Literary Center in support of the Babel series and look forward to welcoming the Buffalo Book Fair back downtown next year. So many opportunities for the Library to be help address literacy through collaborations and educational programming projects. And the Central Library can be the key physical destination for these endeavors. With a prominent location in the heart of downtown, we can serve as the link between our cultural landmarks and a key stop for visitors to our area.

But, we're not just about that kind of literacy. We're also about heritage, history and culture. B&ECPL has an obligation to honor and celebrate our past and create connections between our history and our future – for children, students, adults and visitors. B&ECPL is rich with world-class materials and collections that will be brought to life before our eyes in the coming months and years.

The Central Library and several branch and suburban libraries within the Library System house a vast array of historically and culturally significant primary source books, original manuscripts, unique photographs, recordings, posters, government documents, artifacts, scrapbooks, journals and newspapers. The collections of rare and unique materials have developed over the years through the merger of the Buffalo Public Library and the Grosvenor Library as well as through planned acquisitions, bequests, donations and transfers between organizations.

The wealth of resources available throughout our Library System documents the most significant achievements of humankind. These treasures, along with their context, meaning and historical importance, need to be shared with a greater audience throughout Western New York and around the world. Part of that context is the knowledge of our incredible staff.

The Central Library facility provides a perfect venue for showcasing, preserving and coordinating local and national displays and exhibits. The Central Library can serve as a clearinghouse and central information point for all area special collections housed in our system branch and member libraries and even a venue for mounting collaborative exhibits and producing programs with other organizations such as the University of Buffalo and the Historical Society. This would position the Central Library as a premier downtown cultural destination for residents and visitors alike and build on longstanding relationships with area cultural and educational institutions.

The Library has already embarked upon a number of special collection-related projects to promote and display the materials, ensure current and future preservation and begin additional restoration of selected pieces.

- A renovation project, creating a 6,300 square foot climate and security controlled environment for the most prized materials, will be completed by the end of 2008.

- The Library Foundation of Buffalo and Erie County has committed significant funds to identify materials in need of preservation attention and underwrite preservation work.
- Plans are underway to begin digitizing elements of the collection as a means of preservation and to increase access and retrieval. Improved access is a key goal, and will result in dramatically increased capacity for sharing our resources with the public, other libraries and interested organizations. This is a long-term project with a broad scope, and will be a priority as fully cataloged and digitized materials may also provide new revenue opportunities for information retrieval services.

Preservation and storage is only one piece of the Library's responsibility as curator of these treasures: we have an obligation to make these materials accessible to all. Our community is so fortunate to have such a comprehensive and unique collection of this magnitude and significance – we want residents and visitors to share in our good fortune and experience the power and enduring importance these materials have had on our area, our country and the world. While the number of tours and groups interested in viewing our special collections is increasing, we are planning future programming, events and exhibits to target elementary school groups, teens, families, professional researchers and the general public. Long term, we hope to develop a catalog of featured treasures that would be available for loan to museums as part of their exhibits and offer an image database and reproduction services for those interested in purchasing a special image for their home or workplace.

Our most recent exhibit was developed in conjunction with the Society of Typographic Aficionados' annual TypeCon conference held in Buffalo during July 2008. The Library System's copy of Shakespeare's rare *First Folio* was on display, along with many other materials showcasing special type faces, illustrations and fonts. Visitors from around our area, and from New York City and even Liverpool England left entries in a guest register, including such sentiments as: Wonderful treasures, thank you so much for preserving and sharing. The displays are very important and should be kept to maintain the knowledge that it shares; Awesome!; an enviably impressive collections lovely show! Glad to see so many books displayed; and my personal favorite: Sweet, I read about him in high school.

For 2009, we are planning a comprehensive exhibit and program series on Alexander Hamilton; our exhibit will feature Jefferson's personal copy of the *Federalist Papers*, letters from Hamilton, the original newspaper account of The Duel, Hamilton's newspaper writings, and many other items.

While we are excited about mounting more exhibits, our current collection area and display cases are limited and are not well suited for our current needs. Overall environmental conditions also affect the quality, quantity and duration of exhibits in our current space: less than ideal heating, cooling, humidity control, lighting and ventilation in our public exhibition space poses a serious threat to the materials; still, we make every effort to reduce exposure and still provide public exhibition opportunities.

We are also developing a very special series of programs, events and displays celebrating several of the Milestones of Science pieces, including Darwin's writings, works by Galileo, Copernicus, Linnaeus, Newton, Curie, Marconi and others. This project is being

coordinated with community partners, including the Museum of Science. A number of other future thematic project ideas are being developed with other elements of our special collections.

With a comprehensive facility plan, hopefully commencing in early 2009, the Central Library can transform considerable square footage to a state of the art Special Collections and rare book library. With convenient open hours, a central downtown location, security and a general public service infrastructure already in place, the Central Library is the best location for this kind of project.

The staff and Board of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System look forward to bringing our treasures to the forefront of the Central Library's and Library System's endeavors, creating an exciting, rewarding and meaningful experience for all of our residents and visitors, and positioning Buffalo as a leading destination for the exploration, research, and enjoyment of humankind's shared culture, history and achievements.

I have outlined two of our key initiatives and related goals for 2008-2009 – literacy and our special collections. But considerable activity takes place on a daily basis throughout our System.

The past year has been one of rebirth and development. Thanks to restored funding from the County in 2007 and 2008, along with efficiency improvements, the Library system has been able to retool our services and enable more libraries to reestablish open hours, particularly evening and weekend hours. The response from the public has been overwhelmingly positive. This is a community that loves its libraries.

The first part of 2008 has been a time of review, planning and discussion, questioning the status quo and creating new models. No longer can our staff expect to approach their work in the same way, just because "it's always been done that way". While change is a challenge, it's also an opportunity for participation and creativity – at all levels of the organization.

We are operating as a Library System, not as 37 separate and distinct libraries, or as Central, City Branches, Contract Libraries; a commitment to open and clear communication, and a rewarding collaborative environment continue to create opportunities for strengthening the relationships between and among our libraries and towns. Suburban and rural library directors and board members meet regularly with each other and with the library system staff to develop common-sense solutions to problems faced in our branches and library facilities every day. If there is a request for a service enhancement that we can immediately accommodate – we do it. If there is a question or request for clarification, we address it.

Recent enhancements introduced on behalf of our system and contracting libraries include negotiating system-wide public performance licensing, improvements in materials ordering and handling, shared programming, and we're developing an emerging pilot for new staffing models with several of our libraries. The Big Read is an excellent example of how we can use our strength as a Library System to bring exciting programs and events to all communities by leveraging group pricing, discounts and booking rates. This will serve a model for projects in the future.

All of our libraries were able to participate in the system wide summer reading program, and the 10th annual Battle of the Books. Over the summer we introduced Read Down Your Fines across our system, enabling youngsters 16 and younger to work off accumulated fines and fees on their card by reading at the library, or reading to a younger sibling or child at the library. It was incredibly successful – over \$5,500 in reading bucks were redeemed.

Our libraries should be easy to use and reflect the needs of our users, and we have introduced enhancements over the last few months to make library use easier. We recently increased the number of holds (reserve requests) a borrower can place, enabling users to ‘get in line’ for yet-to-be released books and popular titles; this was established directly in response to feedback from borrowers. Online bill paying was enabled in 2008, and users can clear charges without a physical visit to the library. And, in 2009 we will be rolling out additional service improvements to streamline borrowing and lending procedures, further review hold fees and overdue fines and anticipate providing additional self-service opportunities for self-checkout, downloadable materials and online services.

In times of economic uncertainty, the Library is a true safe haven, a place where people seek refuge and look for quality and affordable services, programs, assistance and materials. This is a tried and true reflection of national public use of libraries, one that we are currently experiencing at ever increasing rates. *READING FROM BUFFALO NEWS ARTICLE FROM AUGUST 15, 2008.*

Borrowing, computer use and overall traffic through our doors is up across the county. Through August of 2008, across the system circulation has increased 3% over last year to a total of 687,000 items; some branches and county libraries have double digit increased, like the East Clinton Branch Library, up 47% over last year; Grand Island is up 10%; Lake Shore is up 16%. Downloadable audio use is up over 80% from last year, patrons have downloaded almost 12,000 titles to date in 2008. Downloadable video is on the brink of being introduced, and I’m sure those number will wow us, too. Our libraries that have circulated the most materials year to date are the Crane Branch library with 89,000 items, our correctional facility outreach circulation, just topping 100,000 items, and the Audubon Library, with 419,000 items; we have six libraries topping 200K year to date.

Public computer use has shown an even more dramatic increase with overall system usage up 48% over last year for a total of 423,000 sessions to date in 2008. The most dramatic increases are at the East Clinton, Merriweather and East Delavan Branch Libraries, and at the Boston, Eden, Elma, Lake Shore and Lackawanna libraries. The most sessions were logged at the Kenmore (with 20,653 sessions) and the Merriweather (at 26,304 sessions) Libraries.

People are visiting our libraries at ever increasing rates. Visits to central library alone are up approximately 19%, year to date we have counted 332,273 visits through the Washington and Ellicott street entrances – 47,000 more visits than last year. We are certainly a primary downtown destination.

Like all organizations, businesses and taxpayers, we struggle with rising operational costs and static or declining income. We do more with less and do our best to maintain a consistent level of service for our users, especially now. During difficult economic times, when the

public's household expenses grow and buying power shrinks, people rely even more on our public libraries for free reading materials and other essential services such as computer training and literacy programs.

We look for creative ways to manage work flows, streamline operations and cut unnecessarily spending, but we don't have much left to cut before it will take a toll on service. We sincerely appreciate the support of the County in our efforts to maintain and restore library services over the past three years. We understand that we, like others, must maintain and contain our costs and expenditures – we are responsible stewards of your investment. Taxpayers investment pays off not only in the quantity of materials used, but also in the overall positive impact library services have regarding building communities, providing cultural and educational opportunities, addressing key social issues, and sharing our history. As budget decisions are made by our elected officials, I request on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of people that walk through our doors each year, to maintain level library funding for 2009.

The library is pursuing alternative revenue sources, as noted earlier, including private investments, grants and other fundraising efforts. Over the past few months, libraries throughout the system have been the very fortunate recipients of grant funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, members of the NYS delegation, corporate donors, foundations, and private donors. I have no doubt that these generous gifts and grants can and will build but we need time to cultivate and develop our relationships and projects. Private dollars should supplement, not replace, a consistent base level of public funding.

So, what is the state of the 2008 Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System?

Let's look at our strengths:

We have almost 300,000 registered borrowers

We have a system wide collection of 3.6 million items (including individual issues of magazines and journals, newspapers, and non-circulating special collections)

We circulate 2.5 million items annually

We're busier than we have ever been

Our challenges:

Sustainable, dependable funding; we have sound financial management and work well with our county budget colleagues, your investment is well cared for here. But as public funding becomes more challenging to sustain, we must not only advocate for continued state and county support but also look for more creative ways to develop new revenue sources.

Aging buildings – some issues are being addressed in the next months and years by state library construction funds and village/town/city investments, but many libraries throughout the county are in need of much larger projects such as renovations, expansions, ADA accommodations, and new facilities

Reduced staff – while we have made great progress in the last year in restoring staff, we are still unable to offer the scope of open hours our users and communities would like to see. Efficiencies and work flow management will help, but we rely not only our staff's ability to open and close doors, but also to provide the expert guidance and research skills inherent to library services.

Our future:

Is Bright – increased usage, developing collaborations, committed, engaged and enthusiastic staff and board members throughout the System, supportive elected officials and fervent community support are our key indicators for success.

I want to thank each and every library staff member for their dedication and hard work, our elected officials for their continued and unwavering support, the board of trustees of our library system and suburban and rural libraries, our collaborative partners and of course, our users.

Thank you for joining me today. Please stay for the exciting kick off to the 2008 Big Read.