



Council member speaks out

WNY Q&A/

Mary Jean Jakubowski on the modern library

BY MARIA SCRIVANI

There were no butter lambs or pussy willows for sale, but, in the weeks leading up to Easter, the downtown library was as crowded and cacophonous as the nearby Broadway Market. Families milled about, kids worked at computers, and parents perused best-seller lists; everyone was enjoying the community space that is today's library. Mary Jean Jakubowski, the West Seneca native who has served as director of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library for the past half-dozen years, reveled in the chaos, delighted that parents saw the library as a great place to take kids on vacation from their classrooms. Once a place where tiptoed tread and whispered words were the behavioral norm, today's library has changed in many ways, but is still a familiar haven.

Why go to the library when you can just plug into a device for books, music, and reference questions? Libraries do still provide these services, but have added many more, including citizenship classes for soon-to-be Americans, ESL classes for refugees, lectures on the region's architectural legacy, free Wi-Fi, job and wellness fairs, and special programming like the Building Buffalo exhibit currently at the Central Library, showcasing a rare collection of architectural books. A library is a repository of knowledge, a place to study and dream, and a center for community engagement. Jakubowski says it's also the future.

When information is as close as your smartphone, does anyone still check in with reference librarians anymore?

We do still have a line for telephone reference. A connection called Ask Us, 24/7 is manned by librarians across the state. Libraries are still the keepers of the facts, helping folks discern what is true. We have sixty-four vetted databases, and our online resources mean that libraries are accessible twenty-four hours a day. We have all kinds of resources on all kinds of facts, and I might add that this information is all free. You don't even need a library card to access our website. We do have over 300,000 library card holders in Erie County, though; you still need a card

to take materials out. We really want people to use their libraries, to utilize all our services, and not to worry if it's been years and maybe you were delinquent returning a book or two. We want you back! For people who just want to download music and books, we have an online library card available. We want you to get the services you need.

The Central Library on Lafayette Square is the centerpiece of a system that includes thirty-seven libraries plus one "library on wheels" that travels to underserved communities. It's all funded primarily by Erie County taxpayers.

What's kept you in the game in these stripped-down times?

One thing we've done is work closely with a number of partners, who are collocated here at the downtown library: Literacy New York Buffalo-Niagara, Young Audiences of Western New York, Hispanic Heritage Council, Project FLIGHT, and Center for the Study of Art, Architecture, History & Nature all provide us with programming support. They are experts in certain areas, and we all need to rely on each other to improve the communities where we live. Libraries are all about getting the conversation started, and getting the community together. We run the gamut in programs and lectures. Though there have been some low points [in terms of county funding] in my tenure here—I've been a librarian downtown

for twenty-five years—I always consider the library to be Switzerland. That is to say, we are not politically based, although advocating and educating is a big part of my job, and that includes conversations with political leaders. We are a financial component of Erie County, not a department, and this was all set by legislation in 1953. Eight of our fifteen-member Board of Trustees must be city residents; the other seven must be residents of Erie County. As far as libraries going in and out of fashion? I would say that they change to meet the ever-changing needs of the constituents they serve. We are counter-cyclic—in a poor economy, when people can't afford to buy books and pay for Internet access, we are very heavily used. And when the economy is growing, we are here for different uses. Libraries today work very hard to meet the individual needs of the communities they serve. We adapt to what our patrons want—easier internet access, for example, 3D printers, virtual reality glasses. Parents have asked for resources that coordinate with the New York State Education Department Common Core standards. In all of our libraries, every computer has access to the Buffalo Public Schools desktop computers. Students can come into any one of our libraries and get into their desktops. We have really developed relationships with schools and school districts—we are an extension of the classroom.

So, were you a kid who hung out in libraries?

Not really, though I certainly did go to the library; my mother was a teacher, and my parents were very supportive of reading and books. I clearly recall getting a bookcase for my tenth birthday! But, I worked in health care after college, as an occupational therapy aide, and then a coordinator for a longterm care facility. Looking at graduate schools, I became intrigued with the library studies program at UB, and



Photo by kc kratt

ended up getting my master's degree there. I started here in 1992. I want to tell people that libraries are not those quiet places they once were. People are using us, finding what they are looking for, and finding something new. Libraries are not going to go away, though the services we may provide change. I don't think books will ever go out of style. And, I do not think libraries will go out of style.

Maria Scrivani writes about local history and people who make a difference. 