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# Children's Programming in a Small Branch Library

Laura Robbins

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The Lewisville Branch Library of the Forsyth County Public Library system is located in a small shopping center in a community of approximately five thousand. The library recently doubled in size to four thousand square feet and houses a circulating collection of about six thousand volumes. I am the only full-time employee and the only professional in the branch. Two part-time employees and one high school page help to round out the staff. Current popular fiction and juvenile literature are the high circulators among our patrons, who are very proud of their library and very vocal about their likes and dislikes. Community effort was a major factor in initiating the expansion of library service in Lewisville. Until my arrival as branch head in August 1983, the library was open part-time, never at night, and for only two hours on Saturday. I brought with me two years of experience in the Children's Room of the Main Public Library and considerable ignorance about a host of other things, so I decided to start out with what I knew: children's programming. This has proved to be a good choice.

A recent informal survey taken in the branch pointed to children's programming as the number one library service, followed by reference, a quiet place to study or read, and reader's guidance. It is good to have these preferences on paper, but based on our attendance at preschool story time (an average of thirty-five and an all-time high of one hundred not including groups), I didn't need a survey to tell me where to devote my energies. Even before full-time library service came to Lewisville, children's programming was a popular service. Story time was offered weekly by children's staff from other libraries in the system, and at that time attendance was around thirty-five. Kindergarten classes from the local elementary school rotated visits to the story time, so their numbers were added to the community children in attendance. The library was half the size it is now, with no auditorium or special room for story time; the performance was set up in a corner in the children's area.

Now the expansion allows us to offer play-school/kindergarten (group) story time on Tuesday mornings during school and community story time on Wednesdays, both in the new auditorium. The latter session brings in ages from two to five. Though this wide range somewhat limits age related planning for story time, I feel that we would inconvenience parents in a babysitter-scarce area by placing age restrictions on these sessions. The programs are offered weekly throughout the year except for the planning months of February, May, and September. Each session lasts about forty-five minutes to an hour and includes two stories (usually from picture books), simple activities or movement games, and a short film. Responsibilities as branch head keep me from planning much in advance for these story times. I must admit that at times my planning takes place the morning of the story time as I comb the shelves for appropriate books to share with my preschoolers. I look for illustrations that work well with large groups, texts to match the short attention span of a preschooler, subjects that correspond to the young child's frame of reference, and aspects of the story that lead to group activity either during or after the story. Capitalizing on this last quality has made a big difference in the success of the story time. Sounds we can make, creatures we can imitate, concepts we can develop, motions, or any activities suggested by the story that allow the child to participate and share the story more have been key ingredients in creating a satisfying experience for everyone.

## Increased attendance

Despite the lack of detailed preparation, attendance has increased, and both group and community sessions work well. Separation of group and community story times has led to increased attendance at the Wednesday community sessions. Knowing that mostly very young preschoolers will be present that morning, I can plan for activities that suit the group size and age level. They enjoy themselves more; I enjoy myself and the different groups more; and word gets around that something good is happening at the library.

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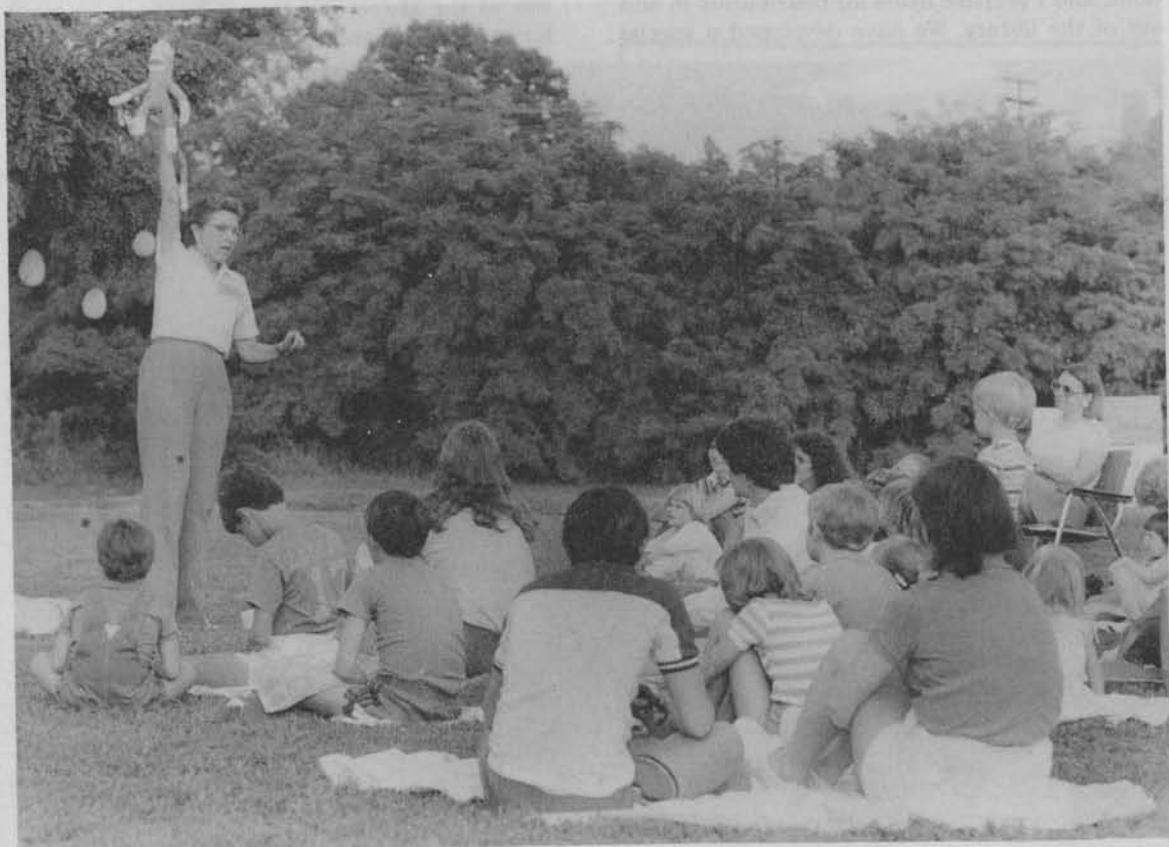
The result is a joyously maddening assemblage of one hundred children during one story time morning. The main lesson I have learned from the preschool story time experience at my branch is that jumping in and doing it is the best tactic. I used to fret about the lack of planning time and space for elaborate story time presentations. Now I realize that the fretting was more of a hindrance than the time and space problems themselves.

My branch does not offer school age programming as regularly as preschool story time. My approach to programming for older children has been to offer special programs throughout the year and to plan for weekly activities during the summer. Because school age children are busier than preschoolers and because I feel I need more time to prepare for their visits, the summer months (when we are all away from homework concerns) seem the best time to devote to regular school age programming. A check among our other seven branch libraries indicate that this approach is uniform throughout the system.

So far I have planned special school age activities during Children's Book Week, Christmas, and National Library Week and have offered monthly Saturday morning movies. During Children's Book

Week I visited the local elementary school where I gave presentations on the public library to the entire student body (grades K-4) by the end of my three day sessions. I have found this to be an excellent way to establish contact with area school age children and to personalize library service to them. The visits were in November, and children were still coming by in April to see me and talk about the books and stories I shared. I coordinated another visit in May with the school media specialist to spread the word about the Summer Reading Club and the special plans in our branch. During this visit I made ten-minute stops at each classroom. I handed out flyers detailing our programs and gave a quick pep talk to the children about using the library in the summer.

Activities for June, July, and August included weekly sessions of preschool story time, Summer Reading Club (targeting school age children), and Film Day for kids of ages six through twelve. In the weekly sessions for preschoolers and school age children I offered special activities from time to time such as visits from the Nature Science Center, experiments with video equipment, Food Day, and a stuffed buddies show. On days when



Guest storyteller Louise Pulley entertains children and their parents at Lewisville's "Twilight Story Time." (Photo by Bill Ray III.)

special activities were not planned I read or told stories to my groups and presented booktalks for the older children. With these older children I also included simple "learn how to" activities as much as possible. Learning how to operate a 16mm projector doesn't sound like much fun to an adult, but mastering this simple skill could be a contribution to a child's sense of competency (and possibly help me in a pinch). Our main summer attraction for all ages was a "Twilight Story Time" in July, offered as a family event outside; it included a bring-your-own picnic supper and guest storytellers. This was the only program I planned for the summer that required considerable organization on my part. Throughout the summer, I avoided programs that called for much preparation on my part and I invited outside presenters. This seemed the correct approach to what I wanted to be a summer extravaganza in a small staffed library.

### Publicity

Publicity is a major factor towards the success of any program. I send out public service announcements to local papers and radio stations, and I prepare flyers for distribution in and out of the library. We have developed a special

mailing list based on our story time regulars, and we mail flyers to them. Just having the flyers by the check-out desk has not seemed enough in promoting these programs, however. Posters and salesmanship (in the local school and in-house) impress upon the patron that "this is for you." Just a simple question like, "Have you picked up one of our flyers yet?" is enough to invite more conversation and to personalize services to the community.

I hope that the activities during the summer have made library programming more visible and have enhanced the library's standing among children in the community. Plans for the future include young adult programming and increased school age activities. A successful young adult film night and good attendance at school age programs indicate the potential for success in these areas. Possibilities for other programs include afterschool book clubs, a library volunteers program, a young adult film series, and programs aimed at school age and young adult interests and issues.

Finally I am learning from my own experiences and making plans based on the approach to programming I've learned at Lewisville. Regardless of the space and time constraints, moving forward is the only way to establish children's



Motions and other activities suggested by stories can be key ingredients in story times. (Photo by Bill Ray III.)

programming in the community. Sooner or later people get the idea that you have something to offer, and they begin to respond to your efforts. This, coupled with salesmanship in the local school (or with any children's organization that will host you) and a little horn tooting in the branch, promotes services and invites individuals to take part in the plans. Remembering to take it easy on yourself in the midst of all of these noble efforts is an important factor, however. No one can know enough or do enough to satisfy the variety of needs and interests encountered in a public library, so planning for guest presenters is not only a good idea—it's smart.

The product of this process should be a library of more interest to the community. Small branch libraries may be viewed primarily as libraries of convenience. For this reason, patrons may be reluctant to use them or look to them in the same manner as they do the larger library in the system. But this can work to your advantage. Because a small branch library may be regarded

as "the little place around the corner," patrons are probably more familiar with the staff and feel more relaxed with the atmosphere and operations of the library. It seems that expanding on this personal aspect is a way to success in any

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programming attempt. Your position as a small town branch librarian lends itself to personalizing service and attaining high visibility among patrons. Continuing to try programs that feel right to you and those you serve helps establish and enhance your role in the life of the community.



Two young patrons enjoy "Twilight Story Time," the Lewisville Branch Library's main summer attraction. (Photo by Bill Ray III.)

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