NEW JERSEY STATE LIBRARY | MULTICULTURAL PROGRAM AWARD

PAST WINNING LIBRARIES

Monmouth County Public Library, Monmouth County
Ocean County Public Library, Ocean County
Willingboro Public Library, Burlington County

New Jersey State Library
MULTICULTURAL PROGRAM AWARD

2015 EDITION | THE SECOND ANNUAL

Monmouth County Public Library,
Ocean County Public Library,
Willingboro Public Library,

Monmouth County, Ocean County,
Burlington County

@njstatelibrary
WWW.NJSTATELIB.ORG

Connecting people with information through libraries
The long-lasting influx of international immigrants has shaped the state’s racial and ethnic composition. Every neighborhood has a different mix of nationalities and languages. Today’s libraries are constantly challenged by their diverse communities.

The Multicultural Program Award was established in 2014 to recognize library programs that increase understanding and promote diversity and multiculturalism in New Jersey’s libraries. Libraries are encouraged to develop long-term partnerships with community organizations that result in sustainable cultural programming. The ultimate goal of the program is to share the library’s program as a model for inspiration and adaptation by other libraries.
HAIR FOR ALL for the Elizabeth Public Library

As the 4th largest city in New Jersey, Elizabeth has a diverse population where more than 21 percent of its population is African-American. The library wanted to reach out to this population through a new perspective: “Hair.”

Hair has cultural significance and is intensified especially in the African-American community. Once upon a time in Africa, hair dress indicated status and prestige. Through the trials of slavery and the Middle Passage, black hair came to be seen as “bad,” while hair that more closely resembled white hair was seen as “good.” These prejudices were passed down from mother to daughter, and remain with us still. The project title ‘Hair for All’ was chosen, since everyone has hair and became a library, as an institution, is here for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender or socio-economic status.

The project had three elements:

1) The Exhibition: 400 years without a comb

One of the goals had been depictions of African-American hairstyles in the '50s and '60s when conformity to “white” tastes was definitely the norm. It was also intended to demonstrate that “beauty” is not just a surface issue, but part of an identity that establishes self-worth and self-esteem. This staff-generated and curated exhibit explored the history and implications of “natural” African hair. The librarians researched books, magazines and websites, drawing upon photography, social and political history for images, quotes and anecdotes that would tell the story of the African diaspora through hair. Staff members offered hair pieces, hot combs, ideas and suggestions. Old issues of Ebony and Essence magazines were displayed through collaboration with one of the storytelling presenters. Some of the images included in the exhibit were Beyoncé with her permed and tinted hair, and President Barak Obama offering his Afro for inspection by a young African-American boy.

2) Storytelling and Panel Discussion

The library connected with speakers to instigate a storytelling session in which the presenters would talk about their encounters with bad hair and how they came to love it, and to draw similar anecdotes from the audience. One of the speaker’s connections to the city of Elizabeth became the library’s connection to a fresh part of the community. The Elizabeth Historical Society co-hosted a panel discussion drawing upon the significance of Stephen Samson and his barbershop in the fight for civil rights, while exploring the evolving concept of beauty and the concomitant search for justice and equality.

3) Film Screening

Although not part of the original scope of the project, it was decided to screen Chris Rock’s Good Hair. One of the questions asked both before and after: “What is good hair?” “Do you have it?”

Partnerships

This project was made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. Staff approval and cooperation was both a motivator and a guide. Using the RefUSA database, the library targeted local hair salons with postcards announcing the project. The library worked with the school district to distribute the postcards in the high school, and tried a similar distribution through the community college. One of the storytellers lent the library framed issues of Ebony from the time period.

Mary Faith Chmiel, library director, summed up the success of the project:

“We believe our project had a significant impact upon our community, as visitors continue to ask us when we will do it again. Many in our audience commented that they had never experienced a project like this, and found it rewarding and informative. Staff buy-in and enthusiasm were essential. Had our staff rebuffed the idea, suggested that this conversation had no place in a public library, or implied that we could not give the concept a fair hearing, we would have had difficulty moving forward. We do feel that we began a conversation. Many of our visitors to the library — for any part of this project — indicated that they had never visited us before. The high interest in this program created a common ground that opened a valuable discussion.”

LIBRARIES AT THE HEART OF OUR COMMUNITIES

We live in an increasingly multicultural world. The U.S. Census Bureau recently released an analysis of population trends. At the time of the 2020 Census, it is estimated that more than half of the nation’s children will be part of a current minority race or ethnic group. By 2060 the minority population is projected to rise from today’s 38 percent to 56 percent of the total population, and the nation’s foreign-born population would rise from 13 percent to nearly 19 percent of the total population. This increasing diversity brings additional vibrancy and richness of both experience and cultural heritage to our communities.

Libraries welcome everyone regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or income. Public libraries increasingly serve as anchor institutions in their communities and as magnets for new immigrants.

The winners of the second annual Multicultural Program Award present their greatest success stories by demonstrating efforts in service development and improvement for diverse members of their communities. Creative programming and partnerships foster environments of inclusiveness, respect, empowerment and empathy.

This year’s winning projects, Old by the Clifton Public Library, Multicultural Celebration Series by the Livingston Public Library and Hair for All by the Elizabeth Public Library demonstrate that by working with community members and partners, and involving their own staff members at the library, becomes even more central to their neighborhoods and connected to new audiences. These award winning programs showcase numerous tips and techniques, and provide models for the improvement of service levels for multicultural groups.

I deeply appreciate New Jersey libraries in their endeavors to promote cultural and community programming as an essential part of their library service. The New Jersey State Library continues to support libraries as they fulfill roles as centers of cultural and civic engagement.

Please join me in congratulating our winning libraries.

MARY L. CHUTE
State Librarian of New Jersey
Multicultural Celebration Series is a yearlong program that includes major holidays from cultures represented at Livingston Public Library. Each celebration was meant to stand alone and had two objectives: 1) to welcome people of all backgrounds into the library, and 2) to raise awareness in the whole community about different cultures.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Livingston is 76.17 percent (22,367) white, 2.26 percent (663) black or African-American, 0.07 percent (20) Native American, 19.21 percent (5,642) Asian, 0.02 percent (5) Pacific Islander, 0.86 percent (254) from other races, and 1.41 percent (415) from two or more races. Hispanics or Latinos of any race were 4.06 percent (1,192) of the population. According to the 2002 results of the National Jewish Population Survey, 46 percent (12,600) of Livingston is Jewish, one of the highest percentages of Jews in any American municipality.

So far, eleven multicultural celebrations have been offered: Eid al-Fitr (Muslim); Mid-Autumn Festival (Chinese); Sukkot (Jewish); Rosh Hashanah (Jewish); Eid al-Adha (Muslim); Diwali (Hindu); Halloween (American); Thanksgiving (American); Christmas (Catholic/Christian); Kwanzaa (African-American); Hanukkah (Jewish).

American holidays are included for two reasons: 1) recent immigrants enjoy these celebrations as a way to learn about American culture, and 2) all community groups needed to be represented in the Multicultural Celebration Series for the entire community to embrace and celebrate with their neighbors.

Celebrations still to come in the series are: Chinese New Year (Chinese); Purim (Jewish); Holi (Hindu); Easter (Catholic/Christian); St. Patrick’s Day (Irish American); Passover (Jewish); 4th of July (American).

The planning process of the multicultural celebrations followed similar tracks: the library reached out to community organizations and members, sought input and feedback, and planned individualized celebrations based on community response. Working with community members and parents was a great way to create collaborative relationships and build community impact. Anna Coats, project coordinator, shared five key components essential to the program’s success: 1) planning authentic programs that resonated with people who actually celebrate the holidays, 2) excluding activities with explicit religious elements, so as to invite all members of the community, 3) mindfulness of diversity within sub-communities, 4) drop-in style programs where patrons can come in at any time during a designated one-hour period and do activities at their own pace, and 5) approximately three to four different crafts or activities to occupy participants. The Multicultural Celebration Series has achieved its goals of welcoming people of all backgrounds into the library, and raising awareness about different cultures. It has taken the Livingston Library to the next level in terms of community collaboration and programming. The most rewarding part of offering this program can best be described by one of the library members who participated in the celebration: “Thank you so much for having this program. My children now feel comfortable here. We came to Eid al-Fitr Celebration. My children don’t have an opportunity to talk about our religion in school so they don’t, but now with these library programs they feel comfortable,” said Sonia Ahlawat, a Livingston mother of five.