The Library Card

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- ATLANTIC MARCH 2016 ISSUE

This article appears in the March print edition alongside the cover story, "Can America Put Itself Back Together?"—a summation of James and Deb Fallows's 54,000-mile journey around America in a single-engine plane.

As we traveled around the U.S. reporting on the revival of towns and cities, we always made the local library an early stop. We'd hit the newspaper offices, the chamber of commerce, city hall, and Main Street for an introduction to the economics, politics, and stresses of a town. The visit to the public library revealed its heart and soul.

The traditional impression of libraries as places for quiet reading, research, and borrowing books—and of librarians as schoolmarmish shush-ers—is outdated, as they have metamorphosed into bustling civic centers. For instance, Deschutes Public Library in Bend, Oregon, now cooperates with dozens of organizations, from AARP (which helps people with their taxes) to Goodwill (which teaches résumé writing). A social worker trains staff to guide conversations about one of the most frequent questions people trustingly bring into the library: Can you help me figure out how to meet my housing costs?

There are three areas where libraries function as vibrant centers of America’s towns: technology, education, and community.

Technology

Many people rely on libraries for their computer and Internet use. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report, more than a quarter of Americans who had visited a public library in the past year had used a computer, the Internet, or a WiFi connection there, with the usage numbers higher among minorities and low-income groups.

More ambitiously, libraries have also begun offering “makerspaces”—shared workspaces that provide technological tools and are designed to facilitate collaborative work. I recently toured the makerspace at Washington, D.C.’s flagship Martin Luther King Jr. library. An eclectic group of hobbyists, entrepreneurs, and a mom with her homeschooled preteens were learning about tools like 3-D printers, laser cutters, and wire benders. Ben Franklin, who conducted some of his experiments

Miguel Figueroa, who directs the Center for the Future of Libraries at the American Library Association, says makerspaces are part of libraries’ expanded mission to be places where people can not only consume knowledge, but create new knowledge.

**Education**

In my conversations with librarians around the country, the most urgent topic was the education of America’s youngest children. Patrick Losinski, the CEO of the Columbus, Ohio, metropolitan library system, told me that when a 5-year-old walks into kindergarten, takes a book, and holds it upside down, “you know there is no reading readiness there.” I heard of many projects like Books for Babies, which is run by Friends of the Library in tiny Winters, California: Volunteers scour birth announcements and go stroller-spotting, offering each new baby a box with a T-shirt, a cap, two books, and an application to join the library.

In Charleston, West Virginia, despite recent funding losses that severely cut library staff, librarians still provide materials to teachers all across the 900-square-mile county. In Columbus, Mississippi, the library gives high-school students access to Civil War-era archives—slave sale records, court cases, and secrets of the community—making real the racial history of their state. In Redlands, California, the program attracting the most volunteers is one-on-one literacy tutorials for adults. And many adults use public libraries as their access point to postsecondary online courses.

**Community**

The library in West Hartford, Connecticut, offers conversational-English classes for immigrants. The library in Seattle provides citizenship classes. The library in Duluth, Minnesota, has a seed-lending program for local gardeners. The library in Washington, D.C., offers tango dancing on Saturday afternoons. In libraries, I have practiced yoga and tai chi, sipped lattes in coffee shops, and watched Millennials with laptops arrange their virtual start-up offices at long reading-room tables. Libraries serve as anchors in times of distress: The library in Ferguson, Missouri, kept its doors open even when schools were closed, and libraries in New Jersey became places of refuge after Hurricane Sandy.

If these seem like deviations from libraries’ historical role as lenders of books, consider that, around the start of the 20th century, the earliest Carnegie libraries included bowling alleys, music halls, billiard tables, swimming pools, and gymnasiums.