

Port Washington Children's Library offers many paths to learning

Visitors can tell something's different as soon as they pass through the colorful entryway and see the librarians' desk under huge leafy "tree of knowledge" structure with a multicolored trunk.



Children's librarian Lesley Siegel entertains kids during Sing and Swing Story Time at the Port Washington Public Library last week. Photo Credit: Jeff Bachner

By Kerry Wills Special to Newsday
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Just before 10 a.m. on a recent steamy Friday, giggling, chattering and squealing — even the occasional shriek — pierced the cooler air inside Port Washington's Jackie and Hal Spielman Children's Library.

One sound wasn't heard: There wasn't a single "shush."

"We've given up on shushing," said Rachel Fox, director of children's services, who began her career at the Port Washington Public Library 30 years ago.



Samantha Sclavos, 5, of Port Washington plays "Fun with Particles" at Port Washington's Jackie and Hal Spielman Children's Library. When a person touches the screen, balls of light gather at the point touched. Photo Credit: Jeff Bachner

This is a different kind of library, where in most areas, sounds are valued. So are all kinds of intelligence, not just book smarts.

Visitors can tell something's different as soon as they pass through the colorful entryway and see the librarians' desk under a huge leafy "tree of knowledge" structure with a multicolored trunk. Its roots lead to separate spaces devoted to different ways of learning.

Henry Muehlbauer, 6, dropped by with his mother, Amy Muehlbauer, both of Port Washington. Henry showed a visitor where plastic bugs had been added to a diorama under glass in the floor.

"We have some Legos printing in the 3-D printer," Henry told a friend. "If you want, you could come up and see ours."

Port Washington resident Melanie D'Arrigo's children Kyla, 4, and Ryan, 19 months, were having fun during Sing and Swing Story Time for the younger kids. Her daughter Alexa, 7, took part in a programmed STEAM activity, that is, science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics.

"I think their programming is really special, and it uses the new space better," D'Arrigo said.

Surging attendance at story times motivated a complete re-imagining of the children's library, according to Nancy Curtin, the former library director, who retired in June. And yet, expanding that read-aloud space was just the start of the library's makeover story.



Estella Gallo, 9, of Port Washington sits in front of the "tree of knowledge" at the Jackie and Hal Spielman Children's Library in Port Washington last week. The tree's "roots" lead to separate spaces devoted to different ways of learning. Photo Credit: Jeff Bachner

No other local library renovation has been done on this scale, Curtin said. The entire children's library was reconceived and rebuilt — at a cost of \$2.7 million — to serve young patrons the way they use the library today.

"We wanted to create a different, more interactive experience," Curtin said. "The library has changed. We used to be the source of information, but with the age of the computer we are not the sole source.

"So, a library now, instead of being like a warehouse of books and research, is more of a learning-through-experience place and a community living room," she said. "To me, the children's library is the key entry portal for how they become library users in the future."

Administrators challenged the Port Washington Library Foundation to fund the project without raising residential taxes. And they did.



Remi Sun, 3, of Manhasset, attends Sing and Swing Story Time. Photo Credit: Jeff Bachner

Harold “Hal” Spielman, an author and foundation board member who donated \$300,000 and helped raise \$1.5 million toward the project’s \$2.7 million cost, said it seemed a fitting tribute to his late wife, Jackie, who was involved in literacy programming for children. Another \$650,000 came from state grants, and \$550,000, from the library’s capital fund.

“The kids love it,” said Spielman, who lives in Sands Point. “It’s fabulous we were able to increase the age range we serve.”

The former children’s library met the needs of younger children but didn’t have an area designated for tweens. In the new library, young adults follow a light blue pathway from the children’s library desk to a quiet reading area, where lounge chairs sit near floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a 3,150-square-foot garden.

Four other paths lead to spaces designated for different uses, including an enclosed “maker” space, a media commons, an early-childhood playroom and the story time corner.



Children work on computers in a quiet study area in the Port Washington children's library. Photo Credit: Jeff Bachner

The previous classic story circle was a cozy, sunken area that seated 20 behind a curtain. The children's library had not been updated in 20 years, and in that time, ever more children with parents and caretakers crammed into the space.

In the new children's library, the story time space measures more than twice as large. About 500 square feet were gained by stealing from a staff office area and a restroom. Rebuilding the children's library has spurred more people to visit, Curtin said.

"There has definitely been strong attendance," Curtin said. "We used to have 30 kids in a story hour. Now we have 60."

Participation increases



Kids participate in the Children's Summer Reading Finale at the Port Washington Public Library Children's Room. Photo Credit: Jeff Bachner

The current director, Keith Klang, said attendance at children's library programs has increased 10 percent from March to June, drawing 4,539 children.

More than 60 children and their caregivers packed into the renovated and expanded story time space on a recent Friday to hear children's librarian Lesley Siegel read "The Wide-Mouthed Frog: A Pop-Up Book," by Keith Faulkner.

Siegel's readings, accompanied by pictures she creates on a felt board, songs, guest appearances from puppets and ad-libs — "Is anybody having slugs for lunch today?" she quipped — are so popular that Sing and Swing story times are now scheduled twice each Friday, at 9:30 and 10:30 a.m. They will continue into fall.

"Some people miss the old story circle," said Fox, director of children's services. "It was more intimate. But now we can service more people."

Curtin said she felt compelled to see the project completed before retiring in June. The new space, built by general contractor Stalco and SCC Construction Management Group, opened in March 2018.

The architects, Lee H. Skolnick Architecture and Design Partnership of Manhattan, proposed basing the design concept on Harvard University developmental psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, said Lee Skolnick, principal and lead designer for the project.

In 1983, Gardner wrote a book, "Frames of Mind," proposing that the traditional idea of general intelligence, measurable with an IQ test, was inadequate and didn't account for the varied ways that people think and learn. Although Gardner's ideas have been challenged by academics in education and psychology who say they are not scientifically based, many educators have adapted them in the classroom, affecting the way children are taught.

For instance, Gardner identified kinesthetic or “body” intelligence, proposing that some people learn better by doing things with their hands or bodies rather than reading a book or listening to a lecture. This theory popularized hands-on learning in classrooms.

Gardner’s notion of visual-spatial, or “picture,” intelligence introduced the notion that pictures, maps, charts and videos help some people learn, and these elements have been added abundantly to school lesson plans.

Skolnick’s interpretation of Gardner’s concept led to the colorful “root” paths that extend from a sculptural tree at the children’s library desk to areas that Skolnick’s firm designed for specific purposes.

A dark blue pathway leads to a play area for very young children that features low, comfortable seating and tables, a colorful map of the community with interactive elements like those found in a children’s museum, and dioramas in the floor that can be and are changed.

“This theme of a universal ‘tree of knowledge,’ it seemed fresh; it wouldn’t grow old,” Skolnick said. “And it gave us opportunities to introduce a lot of color and excitement in the space.”

Experienced designer

Lee Skolnick Architecture was ideal for this project because of its extensive prior work on museums, which often feature interactive elements, as well as other libraries, Curtin said. Its design for the Children’s Library Discovery Center at the main branch of the Queens Library won a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Award.

“I think it has really become a go-to place in our building,” said Klang, who became the library’s director July 1. “Now the challenge is getting everything else as dynamic.”

A new “maker space” for adults is slated to open in the fall on the library’s lower level, right across the stairway from the children’s library. The room includes a memory lab, where patrons can convert older media, such as VHS and DVD recordings, into digital files. It will also feature a digital sewing machine, a craft materials swap area and 3-D printers.

Fox, the children’s librarian, said the heady thinking behind the new children’s library’s aesthetics might elude most visitors, but that’s fine.

“Hopefully they just see a nice, bright space,” Fox said. “Hopefully it’s inviting and draws them in.”

Skolnick concurred. “It’s important to have a concept, but it’s not necessary that everybody gets it,” he said. The point was to give the place character and cohesiveness, he said.

Adriana Piñon Eluto, visiting recently with her 2½-year-old son, Benjamin, raved about the changes as her son played with toys on a toddler-height table.

“It’s phenomenal,” said Piñon Eluto of Port Washington. “It’s a beautiful space that’s fun to play in. My son loves coming here.”

There is just one small problem she sometimes has with the place, she said — getting Benjamin to leave.