

north shore news

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North Vancouver District Public Library celebrates a half-century milestone and adapts for the future

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Actor, author and Tsileil-Waututh Chief Dan George address young readers at the start of Young Canada Book Week in 1971. Photograph by: supplied, North Shore News

It's been 50 years, give or take, since the first North Shore resident popped into a North Vancouver District Public Library and borrowed an item. And it's happened about 50 million times since.

The library is marking the half-century milestone with a year of festivities, special programming and a serious look at where NVDPL fits in the world today and where it will fit at its 100th anniversary.

"It's our look back and celebrating our last 50 years, but we're at this pivotal time in libraries where things are shifting dramatically so it's a chance to connect, renew and figure out where we go for the next 50 years," said Jacqueline van Dyk, the district's director of library services.

In December 1963, council passed a bylaw to establish a municipal library and appointed a board the following month. From there, most of the heavy lifting was done by Enid Dearing, the first district librarian. Dearing, who was a force to be reckoned with over the next 27 years with NVDPL, took the four volunteerrun libraries operating out of private homes, a small store and church basement and turned them into a professional library. The Capilano branch in Edgemont Village was the first to open its doors and begin lending books in May of 1964.

The library has hired David Obee, historian and editor-in-chief of the Victoria Times Colonist, to research the district's history and write a short book on NVDPL, capturing its most significant and curious moments - like the one in 1971 that ended with a shooting in at the old Lynn Valley branch.

How the fracas started isn't exactly clear, though the shooter, who was deaf, had some altercation with one of the librarian. A few days later, he opened fire on the library's second floor windows and bookshelves from his apartment across the street.

"He was actually a trained marksman. When they got to his apartment, they found three sniper rifles, 3,000 rounds of ammo, lots of certificates on the wall saying what an accomplished shooter he was.

"So we do know he wasn't aiming at anybody because he didn't hit anybody," van Dyk said.

Several of the upstairs windows were shot out and the library has kept one of the four books with bullets buried in them. In one case, the bullet penetrated several chapters in a book of short stories, before coming to rest at the start of a story ominously titled The Dead Hand.

The accused received a two-year suspended sentence and was put on probation.

Van Dyk's favourite item in the library's collection of artifacts is the apology letter sent by the shooter to Dearing along with \$210 to replace the windows. Dearing labelled the letter "the boy who shot the library" before filing it away.

But van Dyk and her team at the library know the complete history of the institution can't be compiled from board meeting minutes and old photos alone. To fill the sizable gaps, the library is reaching out to the community to share their memories, photos and artifacts. For that, they have set up a special email address: memories@NVDPL.ca, and also set

out "memory books" at each of the branches for those who want to share their memories the old-fashioned way.

Also on the to-do list for the next year is a series of special days, and contests, much of it centred around 1964 Days - when the public library will celebrate its 50th anniversary by "transporting" back to the 1960s, van Dyk said.

Rather than give plenty of warning, librarians are hoping to promote 1964 Days using the decidedly newer technology of social media. Should you happen by the Parkgate, Lynn Valley or Capilano branch on one of those days, expect to see staff dressed in 1960s fashions, displays of books and artifacts from the time and, if you're good, cupcakes.

Inspired by one of the most enduringly popular pieces of children's literature, staff have also devised a contest, hiding 50 golden library cards inside books in the stacks.

"It's going to be like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, only libraryesque.

If you find the golden library card in a book, you get it activated and you get something special," said Kate Grossman, NVDPL's communications and events planner.

Embracing the different media offered by the library, patrons can also drop in for screenings of movies from 1964. The first ones scheduled for March are Marry Poppins and The Pink Panther. Check with your local branch for showtimes.

Friendly competition is also on tap for kids and teens using drawings and photos using the theme of 50 in the composition. All of the year's festivities will be capped off with a yearend gala and fundraiser, scheduled for early December.

The growing list of events and program for the year is available via nvdpl.ca.

There aren't any records on what the most overdue book is because once they've been gone for a certain amount of time, they are considered lost or stolen and not presumed to be coming back. Still, sometimes a book that has been long deleted from the system shows up in the dropbox or in the mail.

"We had a lovely book show up in the mail about a month ago from Florida," van Dyk said. "They gave it a little cover note. 'Your lost sheep has come home.' This poor book, it was so taped together."

To mark the 50th, the library is holding something of an amnesty on its other lost sheep during the '64 Days. Rather than pay the full amount of fines due on overdue books, staff will accept the books back and cap the fine at 1964 rates, which were one cent a day.

Among the most frequently stolen items over the years, according to library staff: Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon album, the Bible, books on sexuality and coming out, identifying edible mushrooms, witchcraft and, prior to the Internet becoming prevalent, the Sports Illustrated swimsuit editions.

Those wanting to come by popular reading material the honest way often have to wait. It's hard to track the most popular library item as staff tend to order more copies of the hottest books but the hold system has been strained several times. In the early 1990s, it was John Grisham's legal thrillers. When the fourth Harry Potter book debuted, Parkgate librarians read a chapter out loud each afternoon for the kids (and adults) who didn't have the book at home. Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code and Lawrence Hill's The Book of Negroes both set record numbers of holds but the longest wait list for a district library book has likely been for E.L. James' smutty dalliance Fifty Shades of Grey, which went into the "high hundreds." North Shore News editor Layne Christensen admits to being told she was ranked 173 on the list.

Some of the strangest items to turn up in the pages of returned books: a \$50-bill (found incidentally in a chapter about forgetfulness during menopause, van Dyk noted), a slice of uncooked bacon, thong underwear, as well as personal letters, drawings and photos.

Today, the library has 285,000 physical items including books, CDs, DVDs and 100,000 digital items like ebooks, magazines and databases.

Walking through the Lynn Valley branch of the North Vancouver District Public Library on a given afternoon, you wouldn't see an organization in transition. Every seat has someone in it. As many of them are looking at paper pages as portable screens.

Physical visits were up 15 per cent over the last five years and "digital visits" were up 50 per cent. Of the 1.7 million items borrowed in 2013, one million were good old-fashioned print.

But the pressure to change is being felt, van Dyk said. It isn't a question of whether libraries ought to exist anymore but rather a question of identifying how a library can best serve its public in the digital information age.

"When radio came along, when TV came along, the Internet, everybody said that was the end of libraries and yet it wasn't. Libraries adapted and responded to each one of those challenges and changed along the way," van Dyk said. "We never were just about books. I think we have a perception issue that we were. If you really think about the core of libraries, it's about sharing. It's about connecting people to information and technology."

Photo Gallery on the North Shore News

NVDPL turns 50

North Vancouver District Public Library is marking its 50th birthday with a look back at the early days and a look forward to the future.

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