

SCHOOL LIBRARIES PROJECT



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NEW LIBRARIES HOUSE MANY STORIES

BY TODD CYMROT

All too often in DC, the beginning of the school year is marred by stories of undelivered textbooks, last minute school closures, or budget cuts resulting in the firing of a beloved teacher.

This year, families at three neighborhood public schools were greeted on the first day with a far more positive story. An extreme makeover of sorts had been undertaken in their school libraries. Dusty metal shelving had been removed, cinderblock walls demolished, torn and tattered books thrown away. In their stead were bright libraries, fully stocked with custom furniture and nearly 12,000 new books.

Over the next few weeks, a legion of construction workers and volunteers will be putting the finishing touches on these new

libraries at Brent Elementary, Ludlow Taylor Elementary and Stuart Hobson Middle School. The three libraries are just the first phase of the School Libraries Project. This \$2.4 million dollar project, an initiative of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, includes five more schools that are slated for renovation in the summer of 2007.

The real successes of the School Libraries Project, though, are to be found beneath the surface of the gleaming libraries. A student walking into school this September may not have known the deeper story behind her new library.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

One of the most remarkable aspects of this project has been the degree to which entrenched divisions within the community have been traversed. On the most basic level, the

School Libraries Project has united schools that have previously been islands unto themselves. School principals who work just blocks from one another were meeting each other for the first time during project planning meetings. Bringing them together was the first step, getting them to agree on priorities was an altogether separate battle.

As anyone who looks at the statistics will know, the eight schools in this project represent the true diversity of our city. Capitol Hill's schools have some of the most academically unprepared children along with some of the highest performing students. We have perhaps more racial and socioeconomic diversity within our neighborhood schools than any other neighborhood in the city.

We also have schools at very different stages of reform. Some, like Tyler Elementary, are working to overcome years of neglect, while others, like the Cluster School, have efficiently organized PTAs who raise over \$100,000 each year. Despite these differences, representatives from all of these schools were able to reach consensus on the importance of building new libraries. Indeed, the impetus for this project came directly out of discussions held by the newly formed "Capitol Hill Public Schools Parent Organization," the brainchild of Suzanne Wells.

Wells, who is also co-chair of the School Libraries Project, brought a vision of inclusion. Her goal when organizing the first community-wide PTA was to spread the wealth, both literally and figuratively. Wells saw the possibilities for tapping into community resources, but she also saw that not all schools were equally successful in gaining access to volunteers, money, and community support. Furthermore, she saw the potential for our neighborhood schools, despite their differences, to band together and achieve more with

a single voice.

The first major fundraiser benefiting the School Libraries Project mirrored this emphasis on bringing various groups in the community together. Karen Reed of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation developed the idea of a "Literary Feast" in which attendees purchased tickets to one of twelve literary themed dinners. Participants not only received a wonderful meal but also an opportunity to meet neighbors.

At the end of the evening, when the participants joined together for live music and Ben and Jerry's sundaes, one couldn't help but be surprised by the cross-section of the neighborhood represented. Native Washingtonians chatted with recent émigrés to the neighborhood. Young and old danced on the floor of the Shakespeare Theater's rehearsal space. Public school teachers mingled with parents whose children attend private school. In a neighborhood where the private school vs. public school vs. charter school divide elicits the most heated of debates, this was an achievement just short of Middle East peace.

NEIGHBORS REINVESTING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In addition to its broad community reach, one of the unheralded aspects of the School Libraries Project is the fact that it has been achieved almost entirely with volunteer labor. There is no paid staff overseeing the project. Parents, local business people and neighbors have donated immense amounts of time and energy to implement a highly professional project.

Local firms under the auspices of the Washington Architectural Foundation donated all the architectural designs. Phoebe Smith of Hunt Smith Designs continues to donate graphic design for the project's materials. The project manager, Tom Reagan, has taken time away

from his construction project at Mount Vernon to oversee the work at the libraries.

Even the contractor, Dietze Construction, has reduced its overhead to the bare minimum and sought donations and discounts from subcontractors. One of these, Scott Burr of Tech Painting, has donated both time and materials for the painting of the Brent Library.

Much of the funding has also come from neighbors, most of whom have never previously donated on this level to neighborhood efforts. Capitol Hill is known for its community activism and neighborhood involvement. Few other projects, though, have attracted private donations on the scale of ten and twenty thousand dollars from a single donor, with some households giving as much as seventy-five and one hundred thousand dollars to the libraries.

The story here, though, is not that some neighbors are giving large amounts of money but that so many neighbors are giving to their neighborhood public schools. Neighbors from all corners of the community have seen the value in reinvesting in our public schools.

A Successful Partnership with DCPS?

Perhaps the most striking achievement of the project has been the creation of a working partnership between community leaders, private industry, and the District of Columbia's Public School System. DCPS is better known for its intransigence than its ability to innovate, yet this administration under the leadership of Dr. Janey has been able to participate in making these libraries a reality. It didn't take a big financial contribution on the part of DCPS... seed money was already available through a Federal appropriation specifically for library improvements. What it did take was a massive amount of coordination.

DCPS was able to work within a very tight construction schedule, helping to

attain building permits, preparing the spaces by removing environmental hazards, and working with the project's contractor to purchase materials. Nothing went altogether smoothly, but many lessons were learned and the partnership is poised to take on the next five libraries.

With several weeks left of construction and still five more libraries to go, it may be too early to declare this partnership a success. DCPS appears to have embraced the vision of this project, however, and there have been indications that the school system plans to play a significantly larger financial role in the remaining renovations. They may emerge the heroes of this story, filling the significant fundraising gap that remains and making what was once a grand dream a reality.

In the end, it is the libraries that will remain. Come next September, five more schools worth of children will start the year with remarkable new libraries, and they will know very little about the effort put forth to build these spaces. With hope, though, the Capitol Hill community of adults will come to know the full story that lies behind the libraries.

It is this story, perhaps more than the libraries themselves that may prove to be the most significant legacy of the School Libraries Project. That community divisions can be crossed, that neighbors are ready and willing to help improve our public schools, and that the school system is ready to work with neighborhoods... these ideas need to be more than fairy tales. They need to be the realities upon which our schools are rebuilt.

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