

Presentation by Tiina Payson to the 4th Annual Celebrating Partnerships Showcase hosted by Community Partnership Enhancement Forum (CPEF) Alberta

The Collaborative Spirit of EPL

One of the great benefits of engaging in community –led projects like mapping; community-engaging projects, like inter-agency meetings; and other agency collaborations is the increased awareness of all participants – agencies and community members alike – of the benefits to all involved of engaging in collaborative efforts.

On April 16, 2009, Premier Stelmach acknowledged the essential role that libraries play in people’s lives. The premier shares the vision with the library community of seamless access to books, resources, and people to benefit all Albertans, no matter where they live.

Libraries are one of the last, free, welcoming public gathering places; they provide a “natural” fit in working with people in communities and community agencies. In addition to this, libraries have become more than repositories of information or buildings waiting for people to arrive. Librarians have become active community partners reaching out to not only increase awareness of our services, but also to take our services and more beyond our four walls.

I have been honored over the past few years to see this evolution of library service and to be a part of it. Edmonton Public Library has engaged and is engaging with community partners and collaborators in many different ways. An example of formal partnerships undertaken would be those signed with the centre for Family Literacy and Edmonton Public School Board.

At the more grassroots level, branch managers have been actively involved in interagency meetings and engaged in the community mapping process. These collaborations have proven of great benefit to the community and for highlighting library branches as an essential and integral part of community life. Some examples I want to share with you are the in-library programs *Rhymes That Bind* through the auspices of the Centre for Family Literacy and the *Sing, Sign, Laugh, and Learn* program sponsored by the Edmonton Early Childhood Intervention Program who have been instrumental in training staff to undertake this exciting and popular program.

Engagement with communities and agencies happens by providing space, time, skill, and knowledge varying from making space available for LACE (Catholic Social Services talking circle) and tutoring by Frontier College volunteers; engaging with the community, as Gail Walker at the Calder branch has done with the Native Seniors’ Centre, by offering perogy lunches and computer training sessions; and by having semi-annual community information fairs like those held at Woodcroft branch.

Edmonton Public Library has just hired 16 summer programmers. Last year, summer programmers provided children's programming at Boys and Girls Clubs and the City of Edmonton's Green Shack program in collaboration with on-site staff. Also, EPL has hired permanent community librarians for each branch to build community connections and to determine the needs for support and programming in the community. How their positions play out at each branch will be uniquely determined by the branch's own community and on the collaborating organizations' involvement in that same community.

The power of collaboration is in the connections built, the awareness raised, the work done together, and the ideas shared. Support for the local community in general and particularly for children, youth, and families helps all stakeholders engaged in collaborations to build safer, happier, and richer lives for all community members.

I'd like to end with a quote from an inspiring woman who was dedicated to literacy, wellness, arts, culture, and community. The late Louise Hole said, "It is only through education and art – through music, through books, through theatre – that we will find the wisdom to trade hate for compassion and trade conflict for cooperation. Education and the fine arts engage the human mind, forcing us to think in new ways, forcing us to use our most powerful tool for progress: our imagination."