



The Road to Normal

Bookmobiles and outreach staffers
take on new roles in a year of COVID-19

BY Mark Lawton

When Goochland County (Va.) Public Schools abruptly stopped in-person learning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic last March, school librarians Zoe Parrish, Sarah Smith, and Susan Vaughn worried that their students would be left without access to books. Public libraries had also closed, and the county's inconsistent internet service meant ebooks were not a workable substitute, Vaughn says.



“Would it be crazy if we packed our cars with books and drove them around?” Parrish remembers proposing.

They put out word of their plan to give away books, and soon teachers, churches, school libraries, families, and even the local YMCA were donating books for the effort. Goochland County government loaned them a van. And so, every other week from June through August, the three volunteered to travel to six predetermined spots—parking lots of churches, schools, and fire departments—that covered the length of their district, from the outskirts of Richmond’s northwest suburbs up to the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Stops were advertised through the school’s website and social media, and fliers were created in English and Spanish.

In order to cover as much territory as possible, each stop lasted about 20 minutes. The librarians placed bins of books outside, setting the stations far apart from one another, and students were invited to select and keep three titles each. Books were given to all kids who wanted them—not just those enrolled in the school district. Eventually the team adjusted its route to coincide with Goochland County Public Schools’ Sunshine Food Bus program, so children could get free meals and books in a single visit. “You should [have seen] the joy on their faces after being in quarantine so long,” Vaughn says.

Despite the challenges—summer heat, heavy lifting, and coronavirus precautions such as wearing masks, social distancing, and using hand sanitizer—Parrish, Smith, and Vaughn distributed around 2,800 books to more than 700 children, ranging from newborns to middle school students.

“We felt strongly that our kids need to have books, both as a connection to us and to normalcy,” Parrish says.

Cathy Zimmerman, past president of the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services (ABOS), agrees. “We have whole populations that have not left their homes since March,” she says. “Bookmobiles can bring a little continuity into everybody’s life.”

In the past year, ABOS, an American

Library Association affiliate organization that will celebrate its 15th year in 2021 (as well as Bookmobile Day on April 7), has seen libraries maintain that continuity amid the challenges of COVID-19. Outreach staffers and literacy stewards have watched their responsibilities change, sometimes dramatically, as they strive to keep up traditional offerings while covering service gaps and even assuming second-responder roles.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

In March 2020, Manchester (N.H.) City Library (MCL) shuttered its two locations. By July, the main library had reopened for curbside pickup, but its West Manchester branch has remained closed. With a city of 112,000 people relegated to reduced services at one location, staffers were concerned about patrons who would inevitably be left out.

“The main building is not on a bus route, and some people don’t have a car or are too far away,” says Karyn Isleb, MCL’s head of youth services. She and her colleagues began to consider if the library could use its bookmobile to provide outdoor services in a safe manner during the summer, as it had done in past years.



The Goochland County (Va.) Public Schools bookmobile makes a stop at a fire station in the village of Manakin to distribute books and ice pops. Fliers in English and Spanish announced stops in advance.



A Different Kind of Lending

From mid-March to mid-May 2020, perhaps the busiest man in Pima County, Arizona, was Brandon Milligan.

Milligan, delivery manager at Pima County Public Library (PCPL) for the last seven years, normally supervises employees who move materials between the system's 26 locations. But after PCPL closed on March 17 because of the pandemic, Milligan officially went on loan to the Pima County Health Department, where he oversaw distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE).

The county's 17 fire stations collected and donated PPE, which

Milligan picked up twice a week and brought to the health department. There, the health department examined and sorted the equipment, and Milligan then delivered it to nursing homes and other facilities.

His work didn't stop there. Pima County Jail, which had released some inmates in the early months of COVID-19 as a social-distancing measure, suddenly found itself with surplus food. Rather than dispose of it, inmates on kitchen duty prepared more than 600 lunches, which Milligan picked up around 6 or 7 a.m. every day and delivered to Casa Maria Soup Kitchen in Tucson.

On top of that, the National Guard brought pallets of produce from a local food bank to the main library once a week. Milligan and his drivers delivered the food to about 10 branch libraries. Though the buildings were closed, library staffers coordinated to redistribute the produce to area residents in their parking lots. Additionally, Amphitheater Public Schools, which had also closed, had a supply of extra food. Every week or two, Milligan and the handful of library drivers who had returned to work delivered that food to those same library branches.

Between other activities, Milligan regularly visited the branch libraries.



Isleb began by doing her research. She found a newspaper article about a bookmobile in Georgia operating during COVID-19 and called to get advice on safety measures.

Manchester School District, which partners with MCL on the bookmobile, secured a grant of more than \$10,000 to buy new books. A local Rotary club, Barnes & Noble, and an area grocery store also contributed funds. The books have always been free to students, Isleb says, "to help the kids build a library in their homes."

It was a labor-intensive process but a worthwhile one, Isleb says. She, a driver, two library staff members, and up to 10 volunteers facilitated six stops per week, including at two of the city's largest public housing buildings. Staffers and volunteers read a story or conducted a craft activity, distributed prepackaged bags of books, and, through a partnership with social service organization Southern New Hampshire Services, handed out lunches. Book bundles were matched to students based on grade level and interests.

Reading to Go Places volunteer Madison Cowart distributes books and meals at a stop in Bartow County, Georgia, in April 2020.

Photo: Reading to Go Places

“I would check for graffiti and damage to buildings and empty book drops so they wouldn’t overflow,” Milligan says.

PCPL reopened with limited service on May 18, and Milligan returned to his usual duties soon after. Looking back, he found coordinating between the various county departments and agencies highly challenging, Milligan says, as was the sheer number of tasks.

“I was slammed and running at full blast and loving every minute of it,” Milligan says. “I was able to help the community in a way and at a capacity that I had not previously been able to do.” ●



Brandon Milligan, delivery manager at Pima County (Ariz.) Public Library, used the library’s vehicles to distribute personal protective equipment and meals during the lockdown portion of the pandemic.

The bookmobile engaged more than 100 children ranging from babies to high school students during each 60-to-90-minute stop. Among the patrons were refugees who are learning English.

“They don’t know about the library system if they are new to the city,” Isleb says. “Many are uneasy about anything that has to do with government. You have to put them at their ease” by coming to them, she says.

Between August 17 and September 4, the bookmobile gave away 1,100 books. (Before coronavirus, the bookmobile typically ran six to seven weeks from July through August.) “Kids needed something,” Isleb says. “They need a sense of normalcy during the summer.”

REMOTE CONNECTION

Before the pandemic, 50% of residents served by the five-county Southern Oklahoma Library System (SOLS) didn’t have access to a library branch, and 36% of the system’s rural residents lacked broadband internet at home. But with school and library closures brought on by COVID-19, SOLS Executive Director Gail Oehler believes access to digital devices and broadband internet has gotten even worse.

The 990-square-mile Otoka County, for example, has only one library branch. “The people who live in rural areas lack the ability to get Wi-Fi because there is no cellular service or because of their low economic status,” says Oehler.

Like many libraries nationwide, SOLS has seen the digital divide exacerbated at a time when adults urgently need internet access to apply for jobs or government assistance and children require it for remote learning and homework.

In August 2020, SOLS received a \$12,100 grant from the federal CARES Act, which was distributed by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. The library system used the money to convert a library van to a Wi-Fi hotspot. By November, two staff members began taking the van out every Friday and making three community stops lasting up to two hours each. The van also has computers and a small number of books, and it can issue library cards.

“By having access to [Wi-Fi] in these rural communities, we are living up to the American Library Association’s [code of ethics],” says Oehler.

The number of residents who show up for the Wi-Fi van in rural locations might be small by city standards,



she acknowledges. “In a very rural community, having 11 people is a very big deal.”

BOOTSTRAPPING BOOKMOBILES

While the majority of the roughly 800 bookmobiles in the United States are affiliated with libraries, says Zimmerman of ABOS, there are exceptions. Among them is one in Cobb County, Georgia.

Kelli Wood, a literacy specialist at Fair Oaks Elementary School in Marietta, first considered starting a bookmobile in fall 2019. “We always saw a ‘summer slide’ in our students from not reading during the summer,” Wood says.

But when schools stopped in-person learning after March 14, 2020, and the public library closed, Wood realized it was time to take action. “When the pandemic hit, it made it even more important,” she says.

Wood’s father donated a cargo utility trailer that he had used on construction jobs. He and Wood’s husband installed shelves and flooring, her sister painted it, and local residents and teachers donated books. By May 27, Wood’s homemade bookmobile was ready.

Every Wednesday, she and her husband made four to six stops—usually at mobile home parks and apartment buildings—where a librarian from her school met them. Stops were advertised through text messages and fliers posted at the leasing offices of these communities, and each lasted about three hours. Volunteer organization MUST Ministries provided free lunches for students,

while Wood and her team read a story and handed out ice pops to enjoy in the summer heat. Students were invited to go into the bookmobile—a few kids or one

Southern Oklahoma Library System uses signage to advertise its bookmobile services, including Wi-Fi funded by a federal CARES Act grant.



family at a time—to pick out one or two books to keep, with volunteer teachers on hand to assist with readers’ advisory.

During the visits, Wood’s adult volunteers wore masks, supplied hand sanitizer, disinfected the bookmobile, and quarantined any returned books.

“Georgia is hot and rainy during the summer,” Wood says. “Even with that, we had kids and families come

“We have whole populations that have not left their homes since March. Bookmobiles can bring a little continuity into everybody’s life.”

out in the rain to get books. We would pull into stops, and kids would be jumping up and down. I think this offered some hope and a time they could get out of their houses and have a socially distanced, safe activity.”

To the northwest, the nonprofit Reading to Go Places (RTGP) in Bartow County, Georgia, had to adapt its bookmobile operation to the pandemic.

Valerie Gilreath and her wife, Kim Dennis, started RTGP in 2017,

when an assessment by the regional health district found high rates of unemployment, low rates of education, and generational poverty in the southern part of the county. “Government and school efforts were not quite getting at the problem,” Gilreath says.

While RTGP is an independent nonprofit, the library is among its partners. Bartow County Library System Director Carmen Sims acts as an advisor, RTGP enrolls children in the library’s summer reading program, and Friends of the Bartow County Library System contributes books.

Reading to Go Places normally operates from March through December; in 2020, it started in April. “[By then] we realized [the pandemic] would go on for quite a while,” Gilreath says. “With children not being in school, the need for our services was greater than ever.”

Before starting up again, the nonprofit solicited advice from area food pantries on safety protocols. By late April, RTGP resumed driving its 2008 Freightliner vehicle (originally a bookmobile for the Denver Public Library). While most of its regular stops are made in the southern



Valerie Wagley, counselor at Fair Oaks Elementary School in Cobb County, Georgia, reads to kids at a bookmobile stop in summer 2020.

third of Bartow, the nonprofit also travels throughout the 470-square-mile county to give children up to age 18 two or three new books each.

Operations looked different from pre-pandemic times: Two adults rode in the vehicle, and another one to four adults, usually teachers, met the bookmobile at its stops. They set out prepackaged, age-sorted bags of books on a table and stepped away so that parents could get out of their cars and take the bags.

For the sake of social distancing, RTGP had to stop offering in-person programs and transporting lunches through its usual partnership with the USDA Summer Food Service Program.

Another obstacle has been cost. "Giving away books is a lot more expensive than a [lending] library," Gilreath says. "We had to streamline other areas to supply three times the books we did [in 2019]."

RTGP put off buying supplies and reduced the hours of Dennis, its program director and single part-time staff person. In August, the nonprofit began an Adopt-a-Reader campaign to financially support its efforts; by mid-December, it had raised \$3,500, which it used

to buy discounted books from the nonprofit First Book National Book Bank.

Though children have fewer choices in what books they get, "we put a lot more time and energy into diversifying choices that go into the bags, so they don't get tired of seeing similar books," Gilreath says.

She admits the year has felt different. For one thing, she and the volunteers are largely seeing adults rather than children. "We don't get that warm fuzzy feeling when you actually hand out books to kids," Gilreath says.

Zimmerman at ABOS says that experience has been common during the pandemic. "We are a group of people who are used to being hands-on," she says. "Now we are reinventing how we work with patrons."

Still, Gilreath describes the modified program at RTGP as a success. "It's more important than ever that families have books in the homes if they are not in school or going to library programs," she says. "At the end of the day, you are still putting a smile on a child's face, even if you don't see the smile." [AL](#)



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Photo: Kelli Wood