Welcoming refugees to their new community and their library

On a late afternoon in early April, a small group is quietly gathered in a meeting room at Midland Library. Terhas is watching as Corinne stands smiling at the front of the room, pointing to a slideshow projected on the board. Speaking in short sentences, Corinne goes over the various types of education in the United States; she pauses and then waits. Terhas and the other students in the classroom turn attentively to the person next to them, their translator.

The room fills with chatter and animated discussion in Arabic, Rohingya, Kinyarwanda, and Tigrinya.

Terhas is attending a cultural orientation session organized by Catholic Charities for newly settled refugees. During the sessions, refugees learn the basics of navigating transportation,
banking, employment, health services, education, and thanks to a partnership with Multnomah County Library — they also learn all about the library.

When Corinne finishes, she introduces Elena Gold, a library assistant at Belmont Library and Gesse Stark-Smith, a community outreach librarian, to talk about the library and distribute gifts to each of the refugees — Oxford Picture Dictionaries.

The dictionaries were purchased as part of the staff-led library innovation program, Curiosity Kick! Each year, staff submit ideas for new services or programs that cost under $15,000 and could help the library better serve the community. Library staff vote and select the top ideas to move forward as fully funded projects. Last year, staff selected the dictionaries project as a winner.

“The library is here to help people live their lives as they wish, and library staff are very perceptive at identifying changing community needs. The Curiosity Kick! Program has been an encouraging model to introduce new services while supporting staff innovation and problem solving,” said Vailey Oehlke, director of libraries.

Elena and Gesse make their way around the room, handing out the new dictionaries along with forms to sign up for a Multnomah County Library card.

“The dictionaries have been a wonderful gift to the refugees during these sessions. They’re getting so much information in a short period of time so the ability to have something tangible to keep and hold on to and learn from is very meaningful,” said Corinne.

In addition to partnering on the cultural orientation sessions and handing out free dictionaries, the library offers ongoing support and services, including English conversation classes, citizenship classes and one-on-one adult tutoring, which can help adults studying for a degree or professional certification.

Until the allocated funding runs out, the library will continue to provide dictionaries to refugees through Catholic Charities and two other local refugee resettlement agencies. The project team is currently looking for ways to continue the program after the Curiosity Kick project ends.

After receiving their new dictionaries, the group follows Elena and Gesse out for a tour of the light-filled Midland Library. Delighted with her new library card, Terhas pulls an item off the shelf and heads straight for the self-checkout machine, eager to check out her first book.
Our Story

In May, the library will celebrate Black life in Oregon with the debut of the new online gallery, Our Story: Portland Through an African American Lens. The collection is curated around the theme, “building community,” with images and oral interviews from community members and local archives.

Leading up to the launch of the new collection, several library locations are hosting Our Story programming, including film screenings, poetry readings and musical performances.

A kickoff celebration for the new collection will be held at North Portland Library on May 19.

The Our Story collection was created in partnership with the City of Portland Archive & Records Center, Know Your City, Oregon Historical Society, and Vanport Mosaic.
Meet Geoff Brunk, library outreach services coordinator

Library Outreach Services Coordinator Geoff Brunk has been with Multnomah County Library for 21 years, but his library career started halfway across the world in Taipei, Taiwan.

Geoff, who is fluent in Mandarin, has a degree in Asian Languages and first went to Taiwan to study for what he thought would be one year — it actually turned out to be ten. There, he started working at the National Central Library in international exchange, contacting libraries from around the world and exchanging books with them. His passion for libraries continued as he made his way to Oregon and began working for Multnomah County Library.

Today Geoff continues his work with diverse communities. As part of the library's Outreach Services team, he helps people across Multnomah County access library materials through several programs: Words on Wheels, a volunteer-supported library program that matches specially-trained volunteers with homebound patrons; a lobby service program that provides library materials to senior living communities each month; and through outreach to 50 organizations that assist people without permanent housing.

Each of these programs is meaningful for Geoff because of the opportunity to connect with patrons who may not make it into a library branch:

“I love hearing from community partners how Multnomah County Library’s shelter program improves their guests’ and clients’ lives. It’s fun visiting the senior communities, seeing residents from different cultures poring over books and movies in their native languages, then catching up with our staff and one another at these library-focused gatherings. And I enjoy playing matchmaker, going along with Words on Wheels volunteers on their first visits to their patrons’ homes. It amazes me how often the pair have things in common.”

As part of the library's effort to connect the houseless community to library services, Geoff manages library donations to local shelters and organizations. Last year, with delivery help from volunteers, the library donated 15,000 materials in English and Spanish, from books
for leisure reading to titles on GED test preparation, substance abuse and recovery, parenting, and mental health.

During his outreach, Geoff meets a variety of patrons, young and old, English-speaking and non-native speakers. In recalling a special moment, he remembers a Mandarin-speaking patron, a woman in her 80s, who called asking for United States citizenship information.

“After checking with our resident expert on naturalization, Lisa Regimbal, MCL's adult literacy coordinator, I sent this patron exactly what she needed. A few months later, when we visited her apartment building, she came over to thank me. She'd just gotten her citizenship and was excited and grateful for the information the library provided. It was wonderful to have helped a person become a proud new US citizen.”

**April sales at the Title Wave Bookstore**

**Wednesday, April 11:** All hardbacks are buy one, get one free

**Wednesday, April 18:** All kids and teen items are buy one, get one free

**Wednesday, April 25:** All paperbacks are buy one, get one free

**Trivia question**

Digital content makes up approximately ______ of the library's total collection:

A. 10%
B. 25%
C. 40%
D. 75%

**Patron comments**

“The Welcome to Reading bags with 5 books are great. I would love to see those in Spanish & other languages. Thanks!” — Amber, March 24

“I am very happy to see more people of color at Central. Thank you for representing more of Portland residents.” — Central Library patron, March 25
In the news

‘Exit West’ author will discuss his migration novel in Portland talk (Oregonian, March 27)
Multnomah County Library Plans to Stream Local Musicians (OPB, March 11)

Upcoming events

Misinformation, Fake News and Political Propaganda
Tuesday, April 10
6 pm
Sellwood Library

Garden of Delights
Saturday, April 14
1 pm
Albina Library

Blood Lead Screening Family Clinic
Saturday, April 21
3:00 pm
Gresham Library

Powers of Attorney and Advance Directives for Health Care
Tuesday, April 24
6:00 pm
Capitol Hill Library

Spiritual Friends: The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness and Joy
Sunday, April 15
2:30 pm
Central Library

¡Día de los Niños y Día de los Libros!
Sunday, April 29
2:00 pm
Midland Library

More Than What You See: A Creative Conversation about Stereotypes and Identity
Tuesday, April 17
4 pm
Gresham Library

Street Roots Vendor Poetry Reading
Sunday, April 29
2:00 pm
Central Library

An Evening with Kwame Alexander
Friday, April 20
6:30 pm
Alberta Rose Theatre

Bike Storytime
Friday, May 4
11:15 am
Midland Library

Trivia answer: B