LeFoster Williams: Helping the library better serve the Black community

A diverse group of rapt toddlers focus their attention on LeFoster Williams. It's storytime at North Portland Library during a crisp fall morning. With each turn of the page, one child runs up to him to see close-up which creature's identity will be revealed beyond its ears. They sing with him. They stretch and exclaim as their excitement builds. For the toddlers, it's a typical storytime. For the library, it affirms an organizational priority.

As a library assistant at North Portland Library and a member of the Black Cultural Library Advocates (BCLA) staff group at Multnomah County Library, LeFoster is helping the library champion equity and inclusion. The BCLA group, from LeFoster's perspective, is a positive and safe space for him to collaborate with his colleagues. The team members coordinate work on programming and outreach and share experiences, including microaggressions in the workplace or leveraging contacts and resources from their personal networks. To him, the library's executive-level support of this group helps amplify their work to make positive changes in how the library serves Multnomah County's Black community.

And there is much work yet to be done. Oregon has a well-documented past and a systemic foundation of exclusion and racism. Public libraries, too, have a troubling legacy of excluding Black communities and focusing services and resources on white, more affluent
communities. For most of its history, Multnomah County Library's workforce was not
diverse or representative of the community it serves. That began to change in 1998, when
the library started offering materials and service in Spanish. Since then, the library has
added materials and service in Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Somali. That focus has
come through placing “Knowledge, Skills and Abilities” (KSA) competency designations on
certain positions. In 2007, the library established the Black Cultural Competency KSA, which
is now a feature of 24 staff positions at the library, including all members of the BCLA.

A Portland native, LeFoster has seen dramatic changes to Northeast Portland and
Multnomah County affecting the Black community. In spite of many Black families’
eastward migration to “the numbers” in East County, he says “North Portland Library is still
the Black branch.” He points to that branch’s unique collection, which includes the Black
Resources Collection, the Black Pacific Northwest Collection and a robust selection of urban
fiction, which he has been devouring as of late.

When he’s connecting with people outside the library, the first reaction LeFoster often
observes is surprise. “They hire people like you?” younger people often ask. A Black man
with dreads working at the library isn't what they expect. Then, the next question: “Do you
get paid or volunteer?” He assures them it's a real job and says “they hire people like you,
too!”

When he's off work, LeFoster is a champion for the library with friends and family. He says
that there’s a lack of awareness about the library as a Black resource. “A lot of people are
worried about fees,” he says. “They don't know that library cards are free. I want to show
them that the library is welcoming for all people.”

LeFoster is deeply involved with his community. Outside of work, he is active with this
brother, Christopher, in connecting with young people. Together, they make music, which
he says is his main passion in life. The brothers also travel to high schools to work with
Black student union groups. They discuss issues like personal development, Black pride
and figures who changed the world, like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X.

“When I was young, I had people who looked out for me. Some young people today don't
have that,” LeFoster says. “I want to give back. I want society to look at Black youth
differently. I want youth to know that they have to let people know they are somebody,
through the way they carry themselves — through their character and personality.”
Library introduces caregiver kits for dementia

Multnomah County Library now offers caregiver kits for those caring for people with Alzheimer’s or other dementias. Anyone can get a kit by placing a hold online.

Every themed kit contains multisensory items. For example, a gardening kit has seeds, tools and books. The cooking kit has kitchen items and cookbooks from the 1950s. The themes — 14 in total — are designed to stimulate conversations and bring back happy memories.

In addition, a general resource kit contains books about dementia and self-care resources. It’s available in English and Spanish.

Why caregiver kits for dementia?

The number of Americans living with Alzheimer's disease is growing fast. Because of the increasing number of people age 65 and older in the United States, the number of new cases of Alzheimer's and other dementias is projected to soar. A recent community survey by the Multnomah County Aging, Disability and Veterans Services Division revealed high needs for caregiver resources.

Facts:
- One in 10 people age 65 and older has Alzheimer’s dementia.
- African Americans are about twice as likely to have Alzheimer's or other dementias as older whites.
- Hispanics are about one and one-half times as likely to have Alzheimer's or other dementias as older whites.
- Alzheimer’s and other dementias take a devastating toll on caregivers. Compared with caregivers of people without dementia, twice as many caregivers of people with dementia indicate substantial emotional, financial and physical difficulties.

The library received input on the kits from many community partners including Multnomah County Aging, Disability and Veterans Services, Alzheimer’s Association support groups, PSU Institute on Aging, OHSU Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center, SAGE Metro Portland (LGBT Elders), Q Center, Friendly House, and the Multicultural Senior Center.

The kits are available just in time for National Family Caregivers Month.
Gresham patrons get broken items repaired for free at the library

More than 90 people showed up at Gresham Library recently for an unusual reason: their stuff was broken and they wanted to get it fixed.

On October 6, the library hosted the Gresham Repair Cafe with volunteers from Repair PDX. The organization holds repair events around the metro area about once per month. The volunteers repaired 66 items at Gresham Library, mostly bicycles, electrical items and sewing repairs. They also referred patrons to other organizations for in-depth repair assistance when appropriate.

“Staff and patrons responded with great enthusiasm to the repair cafe,” said event coordinator Cyndi Rosene, who is a library assistant at Gresham Library. “The event [was] very successful. Many people came up to thank me while I was working at the info desk. Many of our regular patrons had items fixed, and it looked like the event drew in new people who have never been to our library before as well. What a wonderful service. We're glad to have had the opportunity to partner with Repair PDX.”

Program coordinators expect to conduct more repair cafes in partnership with the library in 2019.
North Portland Library connects artists and community

North Portland Library's second floor exhibition space has enjoyed many local art offerings over the years. The library has recently begun hosting more frequent displays with the help of Library Assistant Jay Cunningham, who is excited about the potential for the space to bring the community together through art. In 2018, North Portland Library has exhibited the works of visiting Chinese artist Gu Gengqing and local artists Jan Grissett, Devin Bernard, Capers Rumph, Jen Bracy, Sam Marroquin and Isaka Shamsud-Din.

The library often hosts a talk by the artist as well.

“A highlight this year has been the Isaka Shamsud-Din exhibit that was up this summer,” said Jay. “Isaka, a graduate of next-door Jefferson High School in 1959, he has been a fixture of the Portland art community for decades. It was with great excitement that we hosted his first gallery exhibit in 12 years. Isaka gave a well attended artist talk. He shared his personal history, not only as an artist, but as a witness to racial and social justice struggles during his long life.”
Sam Marroquin’s *Consciousness and Control* will be on display through November 30. For Marroquin, “images and ideas which are avoided by popular culture and media are the source for her work. Responding to the collective experience of fact and fiction she explores authenticity of cultural information. Uncovering truth becomes a way of documenting current history while looking to the past as well as the future.”

North Portland Library shares works that have been on display in a [Flickr album](#) for all to enjoy.

Pictured: Photograph by Capers Rumph from the exhibition *everything, all at once*.

**My Discovery Pass, the library’s cultural pass program, growing**

Four community partners joined [My Discovery Pass](#) this fall. Artists Repertory Theatre, Hollywood Theatre, Portland Opera and Rose City Rollers joined the three original partners — Literary Arts, Northwest Film Center and Portland Art Museum — to provide free passes available to Multnomah County Library cardholders. Patrons log in to the [online pass system](#) with their library card info to view and reserve the passes.

The passes are donated by the participating organizations. The online system gives the library the ability to fine tune or change their offers, target offers to residents in specific zip codes, provide reports on where and how passes are being used, and include informational and promotional opportunities on the passes.

A booklist feature is also available. The partners may choose the titles for their booklist, like this list of [Hollywood Theatre staff favorites](#), or a librarian will create a custom list for the organization. Portland Opera liked the list [My Librarian Bob Renfro](#) created for *La Traviata* so much that they added it to the [showpage](#) and shared it on social media.

If you have an idea or connection with a local organization that might be a potential supporter, please connect with Shannon Long (shannonl@multcolib.org). The more breadth of experiences we make possible via My Discovery Pass, the more we expand the public's view of what the library is.
Children’s author René Colato-Laínez celebrates Latin American cultures at the library

In late September, Midland Library hosted a celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month and Latino cultures with an afternoon full of family fun in Spanish.

At the event, children’s author René Colato Laínez shared stories and talked about his bilingual children’s books dedicated to highlighting the lives of immigrant Latino children living in two cultures. The award-winning author, who is from El Salvador, takes inspiration from his own life to create stories that are full of hope and truth. In addition, St. Johns Ballet Folklorico, Aztec dance group Ollin Yolliztli, and singer Diana Ruiz gave live performances.

“The event’s stories and art featured the strengths of Latino families and cultures,” said Ana Ruiz Morillo, who led the planning effort.

Volunteers from the Latino community worked with library staff to coordinate the event, and the results were impressive.
“I saw people of all ages and different Latino cultures connected and working together towards the same goal, to help people understand each other and respect differences,” said Ana.

Moments from the event are captured on video.

Pictured: Children's author René Colato-Laínez signs books.

Four fast facts

- The library offers [18 Discovery Kits](#) with fun STEM activities for elementary kids and their families.
- Kit topics include: math, geometry, magnetism, measurement, angles and shapes, gears, bridges, electricity, simple machines, math balance, robotics, programming and coding, architecture and design, bird and animal watching, gravity and physics, chemistry, anatomy, and astronomy.
- The kits spend little time on the shelves because they are in high demand.
- In fiscal year 2018, the robotics kit was the most popular (11.3 checkouts per kit average), with bridges coming in second (9.8 checkouts per kit average).

Patron comments

“At the main checkout desk Kyle assisted me in renewing some items that were due and he managed to help me avoid any fines on my materials. Not only was he thorough and swift while helping me, he was professional and wonderfully task oriented! Hip Hip Hoorah! for mult Co. central library and Hip Hip Horray for hiring Kyle! Bravo. BTW (Dignity is not a lost human quality. Thanks library for spreading dignity around.” —Rosemary, Central Library, October 2018

“Growing up in Portland, but living in Bend for the last 35 years, I had not been to this library since using its resources to write my college thesis … . When I was little, my mother brought us here almost weekly. I loved this library and its books, loved it, and these experiences kindled a life long love of reading, including being a SMART volunteer. I own thousands of books, reading constantly. Sitting in the children's section writing this brings back of flood of memories. I love this room, this building, and the wonderful people who work here. Each and every day you inspire a child, just like me, showing the relevance of books, sharing the joy of literacy and reading, encouraging imagination and inspiring creativity. Thanks.” —Jon, Central Library, October 2018
Two responses to the library’s Chat with a librarian feature:

“Speedy helpful response. Nice to know this service is available. Lot quicker then Apple, I might add.” —October 2018

“Very nice to get help right away thru chatting to a librarian. That's awesome.” —October 2018

"I'm a new homeowner, and, today, I received my property taxes for the first time. It's a large bill, but I'm glad I understand what an escrow account is. I think. Regardless, I was tremendously pleased to see that about $150 of my property tax dollars were going to Multnomah County Library. Love you guys (particularly the Woodstock branch), worth every penny.” —Miles, October 2018

"Have I told you lately that I love the library? My constant use of the Oregonian for work research is one of the main ways I appreciate the library and its holdings. Access to Oregon Historical Quarterly articles through JSTOR is a lifeline that I also use for my historical work on a regular basis, as well as other journals on occasion. And just now I went to look (not really expecting to find it) for a French graphic novel and lo and behold, there are 3 copies of it!! I have a hold on it and can't wait to delve in. The library is a group, tax-supported endeavor (thanks to the Oregon women's clubs in the early 20th century) so I guess I'm thanking all of us in the county, but I still want to say "thank you" to library staff and admin for making it all work.” —Janice, October 2018

In the news

In this Portland library room, you don't have to whisper (OregonLive.com, October 31)
Sustaining Portland's culture of reading and reuse (Vanguard, October 26)
From Brooklyn to Wichita, public libraries create LGBTQ-affirming spaces (nbcnews.com, October 16)
Binge watcher? Library streaming 30,000 films for free (Portland Tribune, October 6)
Now you can stream 30,000 films with your Multnomah County Library card (OregonLive.com, October 4)
Stolen items land in book drop bin at Northwest Portland library, inundating staff with unlikely job (KPTV.com, October 3)
Multnomah County Library Adds Streaming Film Service, Kanopy (The Skanner, October 2)
Upcoming events

Portland Book Festival, presented by Bank of America
November 10
Portland Art Museum

Native American Heritage Month events
Various dates and libraries

Printmaking for the Holidays
Various dates and libraries

Pageturners author visit: Omar El Akkad
November 17
Holgate Library

Everything You Wanted to Know About College (But Never Asked)
November 17
Holgate Library

The Power of Story: Composing the College Essay
November 27
Kenton Library
December 2
Sellwood-Moreland Library

Medicare Open Enrollment
Various dates and libraries

Winter Bird Feeders
December 1
Belmont Library
December 19
Sellwood-Moreland Library

Bookbinding and Journal Making Workshop
December 2
St. Johns Library

Pageturners Author Visit: Patricia Kullberg
December 6
Gresham Library

Winter Wreath-Making
December 9
Gresham Library

Up, Up and Away: African Americans in Space
December 9
North Portland Library