

Questions and Answers

Q&A with Jane Conway, Executive Director, Highland Park Public Library

Introduction: When Highland Park natives reminisce about their childhood, they always have a story about the Highland Park Public Library. That memory might be printing our name, oh so carefully, to apply for our first library card, amassing dozens of index cards preparing for a first research paper or maybe a first “study date,” daring, romantic and, yet, so PG even your dad couldn’t object. Today, a virtual library is always open, online—at home, school and work. Still, its actual location is one place where you always find old friends, either on a shelf or waiting to check out your selections. We checked out what’s new and what’s coming for the HPPL with Jane Conway, Executive Director since 2002.

Q: Jane, please tell us a bit about your background before you came to Highland Park.

A: I was a Branch Manager at the Ann Arbor District Library, and prior to that position worked as a Reference Librarian at the Wilmette Public Library.

Q: What are your early memories of going to libraries?

A: I grew up in a family of five in Western Springs, IL. I have wonderful childhood memories of the Thomas Ford Memorial Library, which was within walking distance of our home, and I would visit almost daily. Mrs. Stegman, the children’s librarian, was so friendly and welcoming. She nurtured my love of reading by introducing me to many treasures within the collection.

Q: What drew you to come to Highland Park Public Library?

A: I applied for the Executive Director position because of the Library’s fine reputation. The job was also attractive to me because it was a natural career step and brought me back to my roots, as I began my professional career at the Wilmette Public Library.

Q: Yet surely there were surprises and discoveries. Which come to mind?

A: I was gratified to find that the community is so well served by a talented and hardworking staff and a dedicated Board of Trustees. Another fun discovery was finding

the original 1930s Library sign tucked away in a closet. Highland Park resident and painter Rudolph Ingerle designed the sign. Mr. Ingerle was an ardent supporter of the Library and served on the Library Board of Trustees in the late 1930s and early ’40s. The sign was refurbished and re-installed at the corner of St. Johns and Laurel in 2002.

Q: Other than the HPPL, what is your favorite library?

A: It was a special thrill to visit the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the new Library of Alexandria, Egypt, several years ago. The library is built in the form of a rising sun,



on the edge of the Mediterranean, near the site where archaeologists believe the ancient library once stood. All of the world’s alphabets are carved into the façade of the building, and the interior space features the world’s largest reading room with a seating capacity of 2,000. I love to travel and have visited many other beautiful libraries on my journeys. Always on a busman’s holiday, I enjoy gleaning good ideas from other libraries to share with my staff.

Q: The physical plant, the building itself, has gone through many iterations. What’s next?

A: The current building was last expanded in 1976, more than 30 years ago. Since that

time, the Library has experienced a dramatic increase in use. Recently, the Library presented conceptual plans for a 9,500-square-foot expansion to City Council. The new space would house a larger Youth Services Department, expanded collections and computer workstations, and adequate staff workspace, and would address aging infrastructure needs. A follow-up meeting has been scheduled with the Mayor and City Manager to discuss funding and the future of the project.

Q: That is bound to involve many meetings and many constituents. How is the HPPL organized and funded?

A: A Board of nine Trustees appointed by the Mayor of Highland Park governs the Library. Library operations are supported primarily through a property tax levy, which provides approximately 95 percent of the Library’s annual revenue. The Friends of the Highland Park Public Library, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, raises additional funds to support special projects and collections. The Library has also been the recipient of many generous gifts and grants from individuals and local organizations and foundations.

Q: You speak so often about the community itself. What appeals to you here in town? What opportunities are there to pursue your other interests?

A: It is a privilege to live and work in such a beautiful and dynamic community. I’ve met many terrific people through membership in the Highland Park Strings and the Rotary Club of Highland Park. Favorite activities include walking through the Botanic Garden, biking on the Green Bay Trail, and picnicking at Ravinia. I also enjoy swimming and cooking—my personal library of cookbooks has grown to well over 200.

Q: Where is the HPPL on the technology spectrum?

A: The Library is at the forefront of technology. Staff is adept at scanning the environment for developing technology trends that will enhance our library users’ experience. The Library’s Web site, www.hpplibrary.org, offers a variety of popular 24/7 features including downloadable books and movies, and full-text access to historical and

current editions of the Chicago Tribune and New York Times. Patrons may interact with Library staff through our instant messaging reference service, and comment about book reviews and recommendations on the Reader's Blog. We also maintain a presence on Flickr and Facebook, and patrons may keep up with author-related news and program reminders by following the Library on Twitter. We have received positive feedback on many new services including Wi-Fi access throughout the building, e-mail notification of reserves, overdue materials and upcoming due dates, and an e-mail newsletter. Later this summer we will introduce our first self-check station.

Q: Do patrons "stay home" more, now that so much is available online?

A: Soaring Library usage statistics confirm that the Internet has not reduced the demands for librarian-assisted research, programs and related services. On average, 1,083 visited the Library each day in 2008. 394,500 people

visited the Library in 2008 (a 5% increase over 2007) and 677,000 items were checked out in 2008 (a 6% increase over 2007).

Q: How can research staff help business people?

A: The Library's collection of print materials covers all aspects of running a successful business, from creating a business plan, obtaining funding, developing a marketing plan, to hiring the right staff. Electronic resources are available to develop mailing lists, investigate current market conditions, research competition, and more. The Library provides online access to business and trade journals, patent searches through Lexis/Nexis, and industry research from Standard & Poor's. The reference staff is happy to point patrons in the right direction to find the answer to their business-related questions.

Q: What will the HPPL look like in the year 2020?

A: The Library will be busier and more vibrant than ever. We will continue to be at the heart

of the community, providing new services and innovative programs in partnership with local organizations and businesses, and incorporating the best new technologies while preserving the community's interest in books and reading. ■

To reach Jane Conway, please call 847-432-0720 or come to the Library at 494 Laurel Avenue, HP and www.hplib.org.

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