

by **Dave Schafer**, contributing writer

## Long Live Libraries

At 4 p.m., teenagers from nearby Pershing Middle School invade the McGovern-Stella Link Neighborhood Library, their voices clawing at the silence, bleeding out of the contained space created for them.

In the commotion, sitting at a small desk surrounded by friends, is Sam Herman, an eighth grader at T.H. Rogers Middle School. Herman could go home after school, but he comes to the library because "that's where everybody is."

Nearby, librarians help patrons check out books, sift through information on online databases, or update their resumes. None of them shush the rowdy teens.

"Our staff doesn't do any shushing anymore," said Mike Van Campen, chief of neighborhood libraries for Houston Public Library (HPL). "We see a lot more people using the library as a place of social gathering, and with that you have to accept a low level of noise, like in a store."

This isn't your dad's library, and these aren't your grandparents' librarians. The digital age is changing libraries, turning them into classrooms, research labs, playgrounds and gathering places. But some core goals never change.

"Being a library today probably means the same thing that it has always meant: We facilitate knowledge, learning and education," said Rhoda Goldberg, director of Harris County Public Library (HCPL). "And we're a place of recreation, 'a playground for the mind,' someone once said. But now, that's on an expanded scale."

"The underlining desire to serve people is still there in the library," said Mary Cohrs, director of the Bellaire Public Library. "How we develop the information is different. Now, it's more electronic-based."

Electronic books, the Internet, nearly ubiquitous computers – those were supposed to be the death of libraries. Instead, they've made libraries more relevant than ever, Goldberg said.

"It's shown just how valuable the library is, because we're still here to help you access the information, help you understand it," she said. "Libraries have kept their relevance because of the technology."

In the library of the 21st century, users can

access online databases on a huge variety of topics. They can learn how to speak Spanish, ace a job interview or use Microsoft Office.

And for much of that, they don't even have to step foot inside the library. The databases, reference librarians and tutors are available remotely 24 hours a day.

"The library has expanded from its four walls," Goldberg said. "Now you can visit it while wearing your pajamas at home, or bring it with you on a trip to Europe. Soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq use our libraries."

"There are no small libraries, just small buildings."

There are more than 1,600 public-access computers in the HCPL system, Goldberg said, and at nearly every branch, the computers are constantly in use, often with a waiting list. It's the same in the HPL libraries and in Bellaire Library, which also sees a regular group of Latter Day Saints visiting once a week to email family.

Patrons can check out laptops for use within the library, which also provides free Wi-Fi access. During an ongoing pilot program at three HCPL libraries, Evelyn Meador, Northwest and Aldine, visitors can check out iPads for use in the library.

The new technology should lead to a more responsive library, Goldberg said, since librarians will spend less time checking out books and have more time to help customers.

Bellaire Library, certainly, still maintains a small, hometown feel. A manager is usually manning the front desk, and the librarians chat amiably with their patrons. When Cohrs started as a children's librarian more than 30 years ago,



**BOOK LOVER** Ever since she learned to read in the first grade, Heather Giancarlo has loved books. She regularly visits Kendall Neighborhood Library to check out new authors and old favorites.

she stamped the book cards nestled in the pocket in the back of books and searched through the card catalogue. Now, it's all electronic, and patrons can access the catalogue from their smart phones.

About a decade ago, HPL introduced online book holds, which allows card-holders to request a book from any of the library system's branches. When the book arrives, it's held in reserve until they pick it up. Or, users can request books from any library nationwide through interlibrary loan. The Kendall Neighborhood Library even has a drive-through window for picking up on-hold books, so patrons don't have to get out of the car.

People can download e-books to their personal Kindle, Nook or iPad, without even going to the library. Even though it's digital, there are only so many copies of each e-book available, just like the paper variety. The libraries pay for access to a certain number, which users can "check out" for seven or 14 days. After that, the book deletes itself from the electronic reader.



Switching to e-books isn't saving the libraries money, according to Goldberg. Each digital copy of newer books costs about the same as or more than a paper copy, since these copies can't be stolen and don't get damaged or trashed.

Book-lover Heather Giancarlo, 67, a registered nurse, has an extensive book collection at home. But she has been visiting libraries for more than 50 years to check out authors and discover new ones. She's concerned that e-books will make paper books obsolete. That may happen – Van Campen thinks in 5-10 years a "significant" number of people will be checking out e-books – but for now, e-book circulation is mostly on top of dead-tree circulation.

In October, 6,222 e-books were checked out from HPL, and 42,171 e-books were checked out from HCPL, the number steadily increasing each month. HCPL checked out more than 11 million pieces of printed material last fiscal year, Goldberg said.

"These [Buzz-area] libraries are heavily visited by people who pull out books and magazines and newspapers," Van Campen said. "The idea of the library as the place to go to read remains."

Jack Watson retired from his stockbroker job three years ago and doesn't have a home computer. So he goes to the HCPL's West University Branch Library every day to read *Investor's Business Daily* and *Barron's* magazine and manage his portfolio online. A subscription to *Investor's Business Daily* is expensive, and he can save money by walking the few blocks to the library.

Nina Stapleton, a sophomore at Bellaire High School, visits the library at least once a month to check out the paper variety of books, usually horror or science fiction. But she sees many peers using e-readers, and she thinks the convenience and chic factor gets more of them reading.

Getting youngsters into reading and giving them a safe place to gather is a significant part of today's library, Van Campen said. Since the late 1990s, libraries have made attracting young people a priority. Many have added young adult/teen areas where patrons can talk or go online – and check out books, graphic novels and other materials. After HPL introduced the teen rooms, circulation of young-adult material spiked, more than tripling at some locations, Van Campen said.

Sometimes, the rowdiness

bothers other patrons.

"A lot of children here, they don't know how to silence themselves," said Stapleton, the Bellaire student. "That can be hard when you're trying to read or study."

Many newer libraries have a quiet room where people can go to study, as well as segregated areas for children and teens. HPL has designated areas where customers can find a quiet space. McGovern-Stella Link closed for 90 days earlier this year for renovations that included the creation of a new teen space and a new glass wall to provide a quiet reading area for adults.

If children get out of hand, Bellaire librarians have the option of sending them to a bench outside the library, or, if the library is closing, to the police station next door. Someone is always watching them though, Cohrs said.

Bellaire Library doesn't allow children 8 and younger to be left without a parent for safety reasons. There is no age rule in Harris County libraries. Children aren't the only ones who cause disturbances, notes Linda Stevens, director of marketing and programming for HCPL.

It's not just young people that libraries are reaching out to. Yoga, knitting, sewing classes, author visits – the libraries are working hard to get people of every age inside.

Alexandra Van Doren takes her son, 4-year-old Max, to story time every Tuesday at the West U Library. Van Doren, a part-time webmaster, is also a full-time mom, and story time gets her and Max out of the house and socializing with other mother-and-toddler pairs.

It also keeps her up to date on what's happening around town, she said.

For Sam Herman, the Pershing student, and others, the library is a place to catch up with friends, browse the Internet or do research for an essay.

He is inheriting a different library, one that is continuing to evolve.

## MORE ONLINE

The Looscan Neighborhood Library, 2510 Willowick, will reopen in early 2012 after renovations that include installing canopies over the entryway. See [tanglewoodbuzz.com](http://tanglewoodbuzz.com) or [riveroaksbuzz.com](http://riveroaksbuzz.com) for a list of local, online library resources.



**STORY TIME** Alexandra Van Doren takes 4-year-old Max to West University Library every Tuesday to socialize with other mother-and-child pairs and pick out a stack of books and DVDs.