

Check it out: Book lovers 'elated' with library reopening

By Jonathan Edwards

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Like Black Friday, patrons lined up Tuesday morning and waited for the doors of their sleek, new library to open. There were no cut-rate deals, however. Everything inside was free.

The revamped Mary Stephens Branch Library reopened after 15 months and \$5.7 million worth of upgrades. Improvements included an 18 percent increase in space, a new children's area, an automatic book return system and myriad aesthetic flourishes.

Patrons suffered about three months with no library at all while the collection was moved to and from a temporary site. They also had to adapt to a smaller collection at the placeholder location, which had been a sports complex.

Tuesday morning brought an end to a sacrifice for a community that checked out more than 1.2 million books, DVDs and CDs two years ago, double what it was four years prior.

"I've been so hungry to get new books," said Diana Connolly, who comes to the library three times each week. So now that it's open again, "I'm elated. I'm just elated."

Five minutes after the red ribbon was cut, Connolly had four hardbacks cradled in her arms. Securing them was key, she said, "before they get gobbled up."

Lin Jin was even more efficient. She was the first person to check out materials at the counter. A few minutes after she'd come in, Jin had 10 books written in Chinese and was headed out the door.

Jin moved to Davis four years ago from Fairfield, where the library didn't have any books in her native language, she said. Davis, however, boasts a wide array of texts, from technology to drama.

"It's very wonderful to have these kinds of things for free," she said.

A few feet away, 4-year-old Dylan Schwagerus found the computers specially designed for preschoolers, part of an increase in overall number of Internet computers, from 16 to 41. He was learning about numbers by using a program Counting with Floppy.

"I like coming to the library and getting books and movies," he said.

Dylan goes to school at St. James. His mom, Kelley, brings him across the street to the library before they head home to Dixon.

"We have been waiting for it to open," she said. Then she checked on Dylan, who was wearing a headset, clicking a mouse and not to be bothered.

“It looks like we'll be spending lots of time here,” she said.

A bigger Blanchard Conference Room decked out with all sorts of electronic gadgets failed its maiden task of welcoming the politicians, library staff and patrons to a grand reopening party. More than 250 packed inside the room, spilling out of every door. The room's occupancy is set at 97.

Library staff couldn't report circulation numbers on opening day, but about 1,600 people visited. Another big crowd is expected Sunday at a free family-friendly celebration from 1 to 5 p.m.

Tuesday was a day of reflection, on the role a library plays in the community and the people it serves.

Libraries “offer hope and opportunity to anyone who comes into its doors,” said former Yolo County librarian Mary Stephens DeWall, who is the namesake of the Davis branch.

Stephens described libraries as “gathering places,” and patrons didn't waste time in proving her right. Two women spent the early afternoon discussing Hurricane Katrina, levees and New Orleans while sitting on new chairs that themselves were sitting on the new slate tile in the new reading garden.

Libraries are especially important during bad economies when people are losing their jobs and looking for work, said Tom, from Sacramento, who declined to give his last name.

“People have to find someplace they can do job searches,” he said while at a computer.

“We serve everybody,” Stephens said. “Kids, seniors, families, students — everybody can find something of interest.”

The odds increased Tuesday with a collection bulked up by 7,000 new books courtesy of an \$80,000 donation from the Friends of the Library, said president Cynthia Gerber.

Before cutting the ribbon and opening the sliding glass doors, Yolo County supervisors, Davis school board members and librarians thanked Davis residents for passing Measure P in 2007 by 73 percent. Voters agreed to tax themselves to raise the money necessary for the renovation. Without it, such an extensive upgrade would have been impossible, said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis.

“It is the citizens and the people of Davis that made this library a reality,” he said. “In Davis, education is intertwined with everything. Libraries and education have always gone together.”

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