

Charles library celebrates 100 years

By MICHAEL REID mreid@somdnews.com | February 2, 2022

In 1922, the County Homemakers Club and County Extension Agent P.D. Brown helped acquire a single room on the second floor of the county jail on Washington Avenue in La Plata, and just like that the Charles County Library system was born.

This year, the library will celebrate its 100th anniversary with special events, programs, giveaways, surprises and more. The theme for the anniversary is “Engage, Discover, Learn.”

“It is overwhelming, it’s historic, it’s such a wonderful milestone that we are so lucky to celebrate,” Charles County Public Library Associate Director of Community Engagement Erin Del Signore said in a telephone interview. “So many organizations don’t have such a long history, and especially the support of our community for so long, which I think is a really special part of this celebration.”

The library has expanded its program offerings this year to include a reading challenge in honor of Black History Month, a monthly series featuring authors titled “Library After Hours” and a month-long job assistance program in April called “Connect 2 Success.”

The library system is also planning in-person birthday parties at its branches during the month of May to kick off a 100-day Summer Learning Challenge. More information

on this and other in-person events throughout the year can be found on the library's website.

"We're extremely excited and humbled by this historic milestone," Charles County Public Library Executive Director Kenneth Wayne Thompson said in a news release. "CCPL has been an institution in Charles County and we are thrilled to be able to celebrate the past, while looking to the future of the library."

The library got a shot in the arm when it first opened when it received 3,000 used books from Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library.

"They were working with books that were on loan and were donated from the community," Del Signore said, "so they were limited with resources as well as materials."

The library closed for seven years between 1942 and 1949 because of World War II, and when it reopened it was able to occupy the entire old jail through private donations and Homemaker Clubs' fundraising.

One key figure in the library's success was P.D. Brown, who in 1950 was the first board president and who served on its board of trustees. Del Signore said Brown, who spent 48 years supporting the library and was instrumental in getting new branches built, was a "huge champion of the library." He is the namesake of a branch in Waldorf.

Also that year, a head librarian was hired who was paid \$10 a month to open the library once a week.

The library purchased a bookmobile to start outreach programs and in 1954 the library occupied the east wing of the La Plata courthouse and later the “book station,” which was housed at Garretson’s Jewelry Store at the corner of Route 5 and Route 925.

“We had a lot of moving in the beginning of our existence,” Del Signore said.

The Glymont branch opened in 1959 in Indian Head and five years later the Waldorf branch was opened on the former site of the Old Waldorf Drugstore. The Waldorf Branch later became the P.D. Brown Branch, which opened its doors in 1981 in the Smallwood Village Shopping Center.

The current La Plata branch opened in 1966 and in 1975 the Bryans Road branch opened. The Waldorf West branch occupied a few sites before opening on Post Office Road.

The Potomac branch opened in 1997, replacing the Glymont and Bryans Road branches.

As part of the yearlong celebration, a 10-year anniversary of the Waldorf West branch will be held in November.

“The community has been a supporter from the very beginning,” Del Signore said. “So many of the letters to the [editor of the] paper were supporting the library on a variety of issues whether it was more space, more books or renovations for a certain building or bringing in the bookmobile and mobile library.”

Del Signore said the library’s staff works hard to stay on trends to have on hand what the community wants.

“It really is [important], which is why we work so hard to offer such a large variety of not only physical books and magazines in our collection as well as the digital resources, the databases, the e-books, free music and movies,” she said. “We have so many different resources for a wide variety of people. We get so many comments that, ‘Yeah, I know there’s e-books and all these digital things, but I still love having a physical book in my hands.’”

Del Signore said the library currently has about 75,000 card holders and added “you don’t have to have a library card to enjoy the library.” A special commemorative library card is available to those who would like to switch theirs while supplies last.

To continue the centennial celebration as well as look to the future, the library is also launching a fundraising campaign for the year encouraging anyone who has been impacted by the library throughout its 100 years to donate \$1 for every year of the library’s existence.

“We can put that money toward so many resources across the board,” said Del Signore, who added that any sized donation helps.

She said the library is a “quasi” county government agency. Its buildings are owned by local government while the library is governed by its board of trustees. Because the library is not 100% funded by the county, she said it is “still dependent on other funding.”

For more information on the celebration, to learn more about the history of the Charles County Public Library or make a donation, go to www.ccplonline.org/100-years/.