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Photos by Phil Chin/AP Images for Library Journal

For 101 years, Alberta's Edmonton Public Library (EPL) has galvanized its ever-growing city. From its beginnings above a meat and liquor store in 1913 to its current configuration as a massive, team-driven enterprise, EPL has served as a pioneering gathering place, connecting people and expanding minds. In the process, it changed the parameters of what it means to be a public library and transformed itself. Having the spirit and creativity to do that meant taking risks, innovating, and embracing change. It made EPL a model for all public libraries and the winner of the 2014 Gale/Library Journal Library of the Year Award. A place where "Europeans and Aboriginals always met and traded," today, people come "to start fresh, build something new, try something out, and make their mark," says EPL's entry for this award.

LEADING THE WAY

EPL is the first Canadian library to win the award, one of a host of "firsts" it has achieved. In 1941, EPL was the first public library in North America to offer bookmobile service by using a converted streetcar. In 1979, EPL was the first public library in Canada to install an integrated, computerized circulation system. In 2007, EPL was the first urban public library in Canada to implement RFID technology. That same year, EPL was the first library in Alberta to hire an Aboriginal Services Librarian and to receive Senior Friendly designation from the Alberta Council on Aging. EPL was the first to develop ME Libraries technology, which lets customers self-register for immediate access to reciprocal borrowing from libraries across the province without staff intervention or a shared ILS. EPL was the first in Canada to offer Treehouse online learning courses, Freading, Freegal Music, Simon & Schuster ebooks, and hoopla streaming video. It was the first in Canada to hire an outreach worker, the first urban library in Canada with an iPhone app, and the first to offer both a lending machine and a return chute off-site. EPL is the first public library in Canada with a branch located inside an academic library.



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A WINNING TEAM (top row, I.-r.): Edmonton Public Library Deputy CEO Pilar Martinez (I.) and CEO Linda Cook are proud of their approach to service and their team, which includes (I.-r.) director of marketing and fund development

Tina Thomas, director of library services Linda Garvin, director of collections and technology Pam Ryan, director of library services Louise Reimer, and facilities director Kevin Kramer. Bottom row, I.-r.: EPL touts its free library card promotion, and Martinez and Cook (literally) stand behind EPL's "Spread the Words" slogan with director of human resources services Mike Lewis (I.) and EPL CFO Gastone Monai (r.). Photos by Phil Chin/AP Images for Library Journal

REACHING OUT TO EVERYONE

More important, EPL was the first Canadian public library to develop an integrated and strategic commitment to community-led service. It hired 17 community librarians to implement the philosophy, introduced in 2008.

"A lot of credit goes to Deputy CEO Pilar Martinez. She brought this whole concept to me a few years ago," CEO Linda Cook says, adding that self-check freed up the positions to implement the model. Every branch has a community librarian who stays out of the building to connect and consult with customers to understand community needs, identify and eliminate barriers to service, and set the direction of library services and policies. They maintain high visibility, growing relationships with agencies, individuals, and organizations in order to plan meaningful, timely responses and evaluate - outcomes.

"Rather than being receptive and just waiting for people to come through our doors, we decided to go out to them. You would be amazed at how many people had no idea what a public library was and what a public library could provide," says Cook.

In 2013, community librarians spent 970 hours working with local organizations such as the Amiskwaciy Academy (programs for Aboriginal peoples), Mill Woods Public Health Centre, Terra Centre for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, Dunluce Muslim Women's Group, Poverty Elimination Steering Committee, and all Edmonton school districts.

HERE TO HELP

EPL's outreach is not limited to promoting traditional library services: it is part of the solution to homelessness and poverty in its community, as a place where marginalized people can feel welcome and safe and have the opportunity to grow. In 2011, EPL was the first library in Canada to hire an outreach worker—two more were added to provide support for at-risk customers. Funded by a provincial grant supporting safe communities, in 2013 EPL outreach workers had more than 6,000 interactions with at-risk Edmontonians, providing addiction support, help finding medical care, housing referrals, employment counseling, suicide prevention, and other services.

The library's Social Return on Investment (SROI) report, completed in 2013, showed that the program

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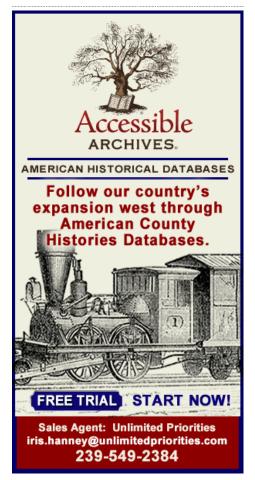
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allowed savings or reallocation of over \$3.56 million in Canadian dollars, about \$3.28 million U.S., to Edmonton's downtown between January 2012 and August 2013 with an initial investment of \$630,000 Canadian, an SROI ratio of 5.7:1.

To make access to EPL services easier, a no ID, no address library card was introduced last October to help customers with no proof of identity and/or residency. Until they can show both proof of identity and residency, customers get a library card with a borrowing limit of one item and computer access. This allows EPL to assist those with no fixed address or who live in transient housing and those new to the city who may not yet have proof of residence.

To reach the 15,000 babies born in Edmonton annually, EPL expanded its relationship with Alberta Health Services to bring early literacy materials, including a rhyme booklet, board book, and invitation to get a free library card, to public health clinics to be given to parents when their children get their two-month immunizations. The "Welcome Baby!" program began with a pilot project in 2013 and has already delivered more than 1,700 packages. It will be rolled out to all nine city public health centers this year.

EPL collaborates with the Greater Edmonton Library Association to provide materials to the inmates of the Edmonton Institute for Women. One-of-a-kind book clubs are facilitated by EPL staff at the Edmonton Young Offenders Centre.













EARLY LEARNING Clockwise from top I.: (I.-r.) Library assistant Sean Chinery, summer programmer Joey Da Costa, and library assistant Andrew Davidchuk display learning materials from EPL's literacy van. Whitemud Crossing branch manager Tiina Payson (r.) presents a family with EPL's "Welcome Baby!" package. Computer stations are a popular spot. Automated returns make it easy for patrons to take care of business, while after-school studying is always in session. Library assistants Susanna Smallwood (I.) and Katie Grzech entertain a rapt audience at Whitemud's family story time, and EPL's "Spread the Words" slogan is advertised everywhere. Photos by Phil Chin/AP Images for Library Journal

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TEAMING UP

Teams drive the work at EPL, bringing staff together with leaders and members from across the system. Team members from all levels and backgrounds gather to "imagine, incubate, and innovate."

They become the champions for team initiatives back at their branches and departments, while gathering insights and feedback and helping everyone understand how teamwork bolsters EPL and its customers.

Core EPL teams include Early Literacy, School Aged Services, Summer Reading Club, Discovery Service, Community-Led Service, Service Point Workflows, Adult Services, the Green Team, and many more. Ad hoc teams are formed on emerging issues and discrete projects that range from furniture standardization and merchandizing to frontline staff advocacy. Staffers from service departments such as marketing, HR, IT, facilities, finance, and purchasing join teams when needed.

"A great leader must have the ability to spot and hire excellent people and build passionate, committed teams, liberate everyone on them, and then trust them with the autonomy and authority to make decisions, innovate, and test their aspirations and ideas in practice," Cook told a Canadian Library Association audience when she received its Outstanding Canadian Librarianship Award. The members of the team will come up with most of the ideas and often make the decisions and strategies to execute them. "It took some time to hone this particular skill, but I finally learned to stand aside and let go of control," Cook admits.

ONE LIBRARY

Despite being spread out across 17 branches (two more are under construction) and a staff of 645, EPL makes decisions and tries new ideas as one unified institution, driven by the EPL mission "We Share!" That passion for sharing drives constant reevaluation of how EPL serves.

The team approach and EPL's unified strategy also led to a move to "foundational programs" in 2013. A survey of prior EPL programs showed that widely diverse programs at various locations led to an equal mix of standing-room-only and almost empty audiences. Ideas were developed in isolation, locally in branches; all programs were treated equally, no matter the demand. EPL's Early Literacy, Summer Reading Club, and Spring Break teams learned quickly that collaboratively developed programs raised on ideas from a variety of people, promoted and delivered systemwide, had better attendance and were easier to prepare and deliver.

EPL took standardized, team-built programs throughout the library system. Now 80 percent are consistent among locations and ensure that popular programs that reflect customer needs and demand are offered at every site. Early Literacy programs always had waiting lists, and Spring Break programs experienced double-digit growth after the standardized approach was instituted. Opportunities for innovation are ensured through pilot programs developed collaboratively and tried, tested, and perfected before they are either rolled out systemwide or scrapped



LEARNING CURVES Top: The interior of the innovative and award-winning Jasper Place branch is a highlight of the system. Second row, I.-r.: Library assistant Beth Hallett helps a patron, while community librarian Mike Eaton (standing) offers computer assistance. Third row, I.-r.: Jasper Place offers activities for all ages, and an outdoor patio offers a peaceful place to read. Bottom I.: the library's curving roof is a striking sight. Photos by Phil Chin/AP Images for Library Journal

SHARING GREAT STUFF

EPL's recommendations aren't just personalized for customers—they put a personal face on the library by letting their content experts' personalities shine through as well. In 2013, EPL launched its "Great Stuff Crew" to help share "great stuff" and staff expertise with customers. "We read, we listen, we watch, we game, and we share," was the slogan of the nine staffers who successfully auditioned to be part of the crew as EPL's featured content promoters. They make relevant, interesting, and personal recommendations about materials. The crew is featured on the EPL website, in branch displays, and through mainstream and social media. At EPL, however, talking up collections is everyone's job. While the Great Stuff Crew is the face of EPL expertise, a local approach to staff selections allows recommendations by branch staff to be highlighted and shared.

Based on retail and library models, EPL has brought all customer engagement (information services, readers' advisory, reference, digital literacy instruction, and customer service) under a single unified Discovery Service. The idea was that customers don't group their queries into those categories and every customer engagement is a chance to showcase services and advocate for the system. Reference interview training for EPL staff is now called "discovery conversation sessions."

SHARING SPACES

With a population of 815,000 and counting, Edmonton is one of the fastest growing cities in Canada. This boom convinced the city council to accept EPL's case for five new and redeveloped facilities. In 2013, two new and three redeveloped branches were completed. The new "iconic, modern, and functional" buildings reflect EPL's role as community hubs. Two are integrated with community recreation centers. All are Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified by the Canadian Green Building Council. Among them, the 15,000 square foot, award-winning Jasper Place Branch, which opened in 2013, received accolades for its undulating concrete roof. Even more ambitious, plans for a \$56 million Canadian, or about \$52 million U.S., interior and exterior upgrade to the central Stanley Milner Library, built in 1967, are in the works.

EPL's emphasis on a unified common experience even extends to the physical plant: the library created a common set of signs and wayfinding standards to give customers visual cues and consistent terminology no matter what location they visit.

To reach places branches haven't yet expanded into, EPL added a new lending machine on the MacEwan University campus to match an existing one at the Century Park Light Rail Terminal and began fundraising efforts for four epl2go Literacy Vans. The first was purchased in 2013.



MAKERSPACE Top row, I.-r.: In the Milner Library's Maker space, digital literacy librarian Jason Harris (r.) gets creative; Holly Arnason helps a patron with the 3D printer. Bottom row, I.-r.: Maker space assistant Naomi Onishi leads a tutorial, and patrons make the most of the area and their imagination. Photos by Phil Chin/AP Images for Library Journal

BUILDING LEADERSHIP

EPL has invested heavily in providing learning opportunities for staff as well as customers. The EPL Leader-in-Residence two-day series gives staff from all levels an opportunity to connect with an industry leader through lectures, meetings, and conversation circles. The public presentation is open to library staff across Alberta.

EPL Leading from Any Position (LFAP) training fosters individual initiative within the library. Over 200 EPL staff participated, learning to take the initiative to solve problems. It has been so successful that EPL has been asked to share the training concept with libraries nationwide.

As part of the LFAP program, to empower staff to speak up, EPL started Crucial Conversations. "We

brought in experts to talk to staff and train our librarians so they could train other staff about how to have a difficult conversation," whether with coworkers, supervisors, or patrons, says Cook. "Rather than hold things in and get angry and upset, or have angry words exchanged, there is a process that you can follow that makes it much easier to do. Our staff are loving it."

One example of such initiative at all levels is that many of EPL's biggest decisions are driven by interns. In partnership with the University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies, EPL gives recent library school graduates an opportunity to conduct research invaluable to the library's future planning on topics such as Digital Public Spaces, Digital Discovery & Access, 21st Century Library Spaces, Customer Experience, and Barriers to Service. In one such study, EPL identified 11 underserved communities, and five barriers to access. EPL implemented many of the recommendations, including changes to staff training, simplifying borrowing and membership policies by implementing the no-ID access card, making changes to loan periods, eliminating outdated late fees, and providing service to geographically underserved areas.

ELECTRONIC EPL

EPL is investing in expanding digital resources and services. The EPL Maker space at the downtown branch was one of the first of its kind in a Canadian public library and features high-performance computers, a green screen, 3-D printers, an Espresso Book Machine, a digital conversion station, and a video gaming area. A professional sound recording studio and mixing booth will be added in 2014. EPL is adding Maker spaces to five branches, plus another four planned for 2015. epl2go Literacy Vans carry Maker space kits.

EPL now has "a sandbox of devices" for staff training and customer demonstration. Chromebooks are already available in some branches and will be at all this year. Laptops and iPad kits are also available for branches to use for programs.

EPL doesn't limit itself to commercially provided third-party tech, either. The ME technology it developed was named an American Library Association (ALA) Cutting Edge Service and received the Public Library Association (PLA) Polaris Innovation in Technology John Iliff Award. EPL has made the code openly available at GitHub.

100 YEARS YOUNG

EPL celebrated its centennial in 2013 by making library cards free. Though free cards are taken for granted in many places, EPL had long charged \$12 Canadian and had to justify the loss of \$700,000 Canadian in revenue. The change was more than borne out by the response: new registrations and renewals grew from a daily average of 150 to 200 to a whopping 4,545 on March 13. In the first two months of the campaign, 60,000 people signed up, and by year end, there was a 40 percent increase in memberships.

A large-scale, multifaceted media mix was used to create awareness of the centennial, its slogan —"Old? No way. We're just getting started!"—and the free library card campaign. The result? Thousands of social media birthday wishes and over 22,000 in person visits for the week of March 13, up 56 percent. Pop-up membership drives at 52 locations signed up in excess of 4,000 new - cardholders.

EPL launched major fundraising efforts as part of its centennial. Its customer newsletter went to more than 100,000 recipients. The results drew 356 supporters, including 189 first-time donors, providing \$41,000 Canadian, for a ROI of over 300 percent. Library users were invited to EPL's first Library Lovers Brunch to learn more about fundraising projects. The focus on everyday library users helped increase annual giving by 485 percent year-over-year, with a 382 percent increase in the total number of donors. "Connected Edmontonians" were recruited for a Centennial Fundraising Advisory Committee to help champion EPL in their communities of influence, raising \$800,000 Canadian, or about \$738,000 U.S.

SUSTAINED SUPPORT

Impressive as those numbers are, EPL does not depend on once-in-a-lifetime occasions for its financial well-being. EPL's annual budget was \$49,308,299 Canadian, or \$45,487,350 U.S.—a healthy \$60.31 per capita—of which \$6,618,200 Canadian was for materials. That budget supports a staff of 645, of whom 80 are professional librarians. Users came to the library 5,218,136 times last year and borrowed

10,142,357 items. The website was visited 4,693,127 times.

A supportive city council is committed to investing in a strong public library, the result of strategic relationship building. Most library election strategies, including EPL's in the past, focus on encouraging customers to be informed voters. EPL's new goal is to inform candidates of the work EPL does by developing a kit of materials outlining how Great Libraries Shape Great Cities and hosting candidate lunches at branches.

EPL is clearly a model for public libraries everywhere, constantly innovating and changing to meet the new needs and demands of a growing city. It has transformed itself from a loosely connected set of libraries and services into a united, team-driven enterprise. That transformation, while convincing its staff of the value of concerted, centralized, and well-managed effort, has also empowered them to innovate and inspired them to come up with the ideas that have kept EPL moving into a strong future.

LIBRARY OF THE YEAR 2014 SPECIAL MENTION

Many of the nominees in this competition demonstrate the innovation and excellence practiced every day by U.S. and Canadian libraries. Two other libraries in particular deserve special mention for featuring the service philosophy and dedication to community that signify a Library of the Year:

Vancouver Public Library, BC Sandra Singh, Chief Librarian

Multnomah County Public Library, OR Vailey Oehlke, Director

LIBRARY OF THE YEAR 2014 JUDGES

LJ thanks the following individuals who volunteered their valuable time to help select the 2014 Library of the Year:

Amy W. Dodson, Director, Pine River Library, CO, LJ 2014 Best Small Library in America **Valerie Gross**, CEO and President, Howard County Public Library, MD, Gale/LJ 2013 Library of the Year

Corinne Hill, Executive Director, Chattanooga Public Library, *LJ* 2014 Librarian of the Year Nader M. Qaimari, Senior Vice President, Marketing, Gale | Cengage Learning

The panel also includes LJ's John N. Berry III, Ian Chant, Matt Enis, Barbara Genco, Rebecca T. Miller, and Meredith Schwartz

This article was published in Library Journal's June 15, 2014 issue. <u>Subscribe today</u> and save up to 35% off the regular subscription rate.



About John N. Berry III

John N. Berry III (<u>iberry@mediasourceinc.com</u>) is Editor-at-Large, *LJ*. Berry joined the magazine in 1964 as Assistant Editor, becoming editor-in-Chief in 1969 and serving in that role until 2006.

Filed Under: <u>Awards</u>, <u>Featured</u>, <u>LJ in Print</u>, <u>Managing Libraries</u> Tagged With: <u>Library of the Year</u>, <u>LJ 2014 Jun 15</u>



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Rick Leech says:	
June 11, 2014 at 3:21 pm	
Congratulations to Linda, Pilar and all the Edmonton Public LIbrary team for this well-	
deserved award. What an honour to receive the prestigious Library of the Year award! It is a trib	oute
to their hard work, innovation and commitment to the community.	
Bravo!	
Rick Leech (A proud EPL member)	
Vailay Oablisa agus	
Vailey Oehlke says: June 11, 2014 at 6:22 pm	
MILE 11, 2014 at 0.22 pm	
second that bravo! So well deserved. Linda, you and your folks have really set the bar	
or libraries moving forward. Congratulations and well done!	
/ailey	
Sandra M. Anderson says:	
June 11, 2014 at 6:31 pm	
Congratulations, EPL! As one of your branch patrons, I'm constantly impressed with the	
energy and expertise that has transformed Edmonton's libraries. And the EPL patron website is	the
pest-designed and most user-friendly website I know and should be the model for public librarie	S
everywhere.	
Raj Seshadri says:	
June 12, 2014 at 8:33 pm	
Great work EPL Team! These are the kinds of things that make Edmonton a great place	
to live. My family of 4 have been proud Edmontonians since 2006.	
Cheers,	
Raj	
Cyndee Landrum says:	
June 13, 2014 at 8:29 am	
Congrats to our colleagues at Edmonton Public. I have always admired and respected	
our research focused practice. This is a well-deserved honor.	
Sally Robertson says:	
June 16, 2014 at 7:37 am	
Congratulations on this award. I'm an academic librarian now, but I started out as library	
page at an all volunteer public library in a small town outside of Chicago, Illinois, Clarendon Hill	
That is how I decided to go to library school to become a librarian. My passion is being a librarian	an
and "spreading the words". In case you do not know about this great learning tool check out	
http://www.merlot.org, it's international. I think you might like it. Keep up the good work!	
Steven V. Potter says:	
June 17, 2014 at 3:19 pm	

I have always been very impressed with EPL and the team in Edmonton. Congratulations to you on a very well deserved recognition.

Steve

Keith Janke says:

June 25, 2014 at 12:51 pm

Belated but sincere congratulations to Linda Cook and the entire staff of the EPL! I believe that the public library is one of the most progressive social resources of our age and I'm always impressed by how well-supported they are in communities throughout North America. Here in Edmonton, I've been particularly impressed with the dignified and proactive manner in which library social workers, as well as regular library staff, interact with the homeless citizens of our city – to the benefit of us all.

John Richardson says:

June 29, 2014 at 5:09 pm

I'm so very proud of my "hometown" library, Edmonton Public, even though I've left
Edmonton years ago to follow my career. I've been able to watch the evolution of EPL over the past
25 years as I'm still involved in library conferences, both in Alberta, across Canada and in the US. I
applaud LJ and the voting committee to look North to have an expanded view of what's possible in
library programs, services, approaches and leadership. A very deserving library, and
congratulations for the risk taking, innovation and people development over the years — well done!

Vera Cooke says:

July 3, 2014 at 4:05 pm

Congratulations Linda and all the staff. I became a volunteer when I retired in 1991 and have worked every book sale, beginning in the reign of Joan Peyton, since then until a year ago when I had to miss doing it due to illness. What a wonderful group of people the volunteers were. They became my new family and while we worked hard, we worked together. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to meet such a great group of people- volunteers and staff.

Keep up the good work!

Vera Cooke

I shall hopefully be returning to the Fall book sales!



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