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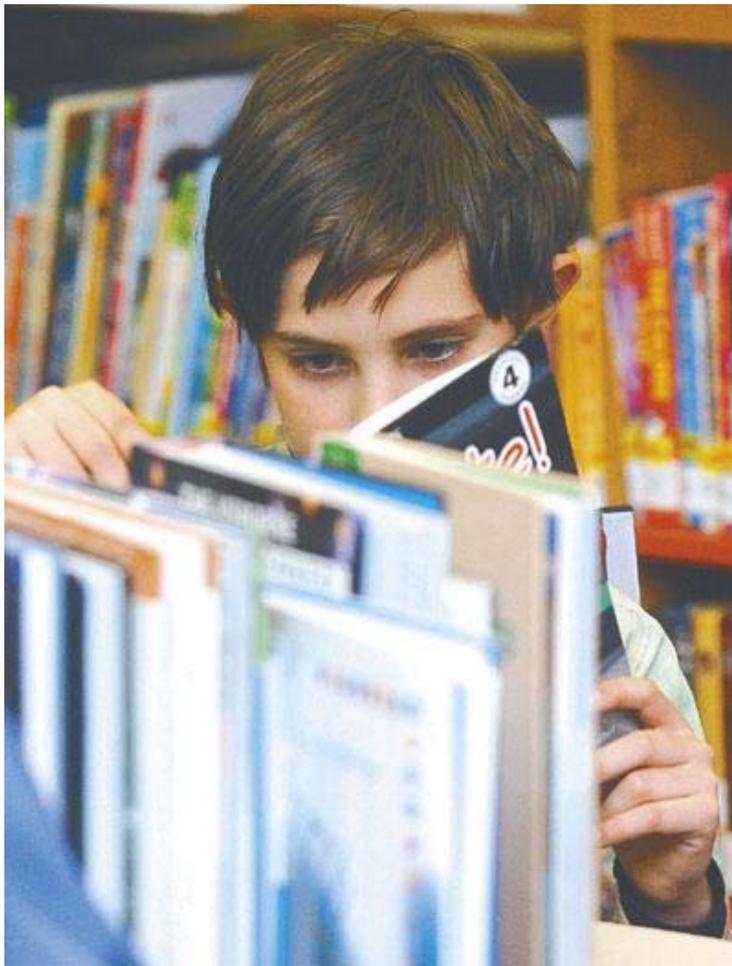


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In tough economic times, more people turning to libraries

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Sunday, February 22, 2009 3:07 AM EST

By KYLE WIND
Freeman staff

AS FAMILIES and individuals work to stretch their budgets in difficult economic times, many “have rediscovered that little card in their wallet,” says Kingston Library Director Margie Menard.

From 2007 to 2008, Menard said, the Kingston Library’s list of registered users grew from 17,100 to 17,815. At the same time, circulation grew by about 20 percent, and computer usage at the library picked up, she said.

“The city of Kingston has always supported us,” Menard said. “During times like these, you can see why libraries are really important.”

Member libraries in the Mid-Hudson Library System, including Kingston, do not charge for a library card or access to books and DVDs that library patrons otherwise would have to pay for to buy or rent.

TOWN OF Ulster Public Library Director Faith Johnson said she hopes “people realize libraries are more than a place to find a book and read.”

Indeed, that seems to be the case, evidenced by the fact that the Ulster library issued 30 new library cards last month and has issued one or two each day since, Johnson said. And a number of patrons, she said, have told her they canceled their cable TV service in favor of what is available at the library.

Johnson also said that so many people have been using the Ulster Avenue library lately to hunt for jobs — whether by visiting Web sites or putting together resumes on the library’s computers — that the library is planning to create a job center for that purpose.

SAUGERTIES Public Library Director Jessica Serrano said she, too, has seen an increasing number of job searchers at her library. She said it’s sad to see people out of work, “but I’m happy the community recognizes us as a resource.”

Serrano, whose library had a 3 percent increase in new library cards issued in the latter half of 2008 and a 22 percent jump in computer usage, said libraries also are a good place to connect with people, whether through organized activities, talking with other patrons or chatting online.

“I do like seeing people read books, though,” said Johnson, the Ulster director.

THOUGH PEOPLE sometimes tell Johnson that they do not typically read, she said she is able to consistently

and successfully match them up with books.

And despite the emphasis on computers, increased usage of the Ulster library has translated to more reading, and Johnson said the “New Books” shelf has often been “emptied quickly” lately.

Johnson said books about topics like bankruptcies and foreclosures have been increasingly popular, and she has observed that library-goers often strike up conversations when they see others studying similar topics. Those who have fallen on hard times sometimes need to talk, she said.

MEANWHILE, organized activities, whether story time for children or more adult-oriented activities like the Saugerties Library’s paper quilling classes, give participants a chance to meet people with similar interests.

Johnson said the Ulster library began a series with Kingston chiropractor and nutritionist Lisa Malffucci at 5 p.m. Wednesday with a lecture about permanent weight loss. A March 18 session will focus on stress management, and an April 15 lecture will focus on hand problems like carpal tunnel syndrome. Admission is free, but reservations are recommended.

BUT WHILE the weak economy has fueled an increase in the public’s use of libraries, it also threatens to reduce their services. Despite what the Mid-Hudson Library System calls the “meteoric rise in popularity” of public libraries, Gov. David Paterson’s proposed state budget for 2009-10 calls for an 18 percent reduction in library aid.

Menard, at Kingston’s library, said library taxes cover most of the cost of each library’s operations — which is why library cards can be free — and that the state cuts target the Mid-Hudson Library System as a whole. But she still believes the cuts will hurt individual libraries.

THE MID-HUDSON Library System reported a 14 percent jump in the use of its online catalog and delivery systems in 2008. The system allows member libraries to explore the stock of other member libraries and deliver books to where they are needed — what Menard calls an “interlibrary loan.”

Johnson estimated her library sends 1,200 books out via the service per month during typical years but recent demand has driven the number up to between 1,700 and 1,800.

Menard said other valuable services the Mid-Hudson Library System provides include consulting, continuing education for staff members and coordination of summer reading programs.

The Mid-Hudson Library System estimates that if it did not exist, it would cost 33 percent more to run local libraries.

“THERE IS a lot of doom and gloom out there, but libraries can be a beacon of hope in many communities,” said Josh Cohen, executive director of the system.

Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of DailyFreeman.com.

pinchas werba wrote on Feb 22, 2009 6:23 PM:

" The value that any library offers to a community cannot be measured in gold or any extemporaneous pearls of wisdom or whatever other clichés out there one chooses to use. Andrew Carnegie once said that more positive things were done for humanity by those who used libraries versus things that were done by those who didn't frequent their local library. The 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction writer, Junot Diaz, (a Dominican Republic immigrant who never used steroids) credits a library in NJ where he would walk four miles so he could check out books to satisfy his voracious appetite for reading which put him on the path to becoming a college professor as well as a great writer.

The people who run the Kingston Library are some of the most dedicated ones around with Margie Menard being

the consummate director and the rest of the staff all being topnotch. Mary Lou Decker has worked there for over 38 years and every other staff member is always ready to assist the patrons however they can from helping with research projects for any age person, student or non-student; to suggesting books of interest; to finding various forms for income tax filers; to navigating the Internet.

The Ulster County Infoportal on the website (at KingstonLibrary.org) which is provided by our very own UC Legislature, is an invaluable link to the world providing information ranging from genealogy, to Chilton's car repair manuals for all vehicles, to career and college prep tools, to newspapers, magazines and the Mango language learning program which took the place of Rosetta Stone. You can teach yourself Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, French, German, Italian, Greek, Russian, Mandarin Chinese and English is offered for Polish, Spanish or Brazilian Portuguese speaking people.

All you need is a library card which is issued for free to local residents and the desire to keep your gray matter in the pink. Audio books, CD's, DVD's, and VCR tapes are also available to borrow. I read recently that one large city in Connecticut, where they wanted to be open 7 days a week, was forced to cut their schedule back to only 4 days a week. Our NYS Legislature plans on an 18% budget cut for libraries statewide which is not a sensible idea and one which we can all protest by writing or emailing our representatives to tell them that this is not a satisfactory place to cut funding. To quote Michael Borges, the Executive Director of the New York Library Association, "To add insult to injury, the NYS Department of Tax and Finance issued a press release saying they are no longer mailing tax forms to individuals and that taxpayers should go to their public libraries to pick up or download forms. The state is literally passing the buck to libraries and taking it away at the same time," concluded Mr. Borges. Visit your local library and donate something if you can because the measure of a civilization is commensurate with its ability to store and disseminate information of all kinds and reading and writing books will never go out of style. "

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