

Ocean County Library at 90

By: Victoria Ford



Author Jessica Felloves with librarian Sandra Eckert, greeting each other at the Downtown Abbey (early 2015) event as part of our 90th anniversary celebration. Photo credit: Ocean County Library

This Sept. 19 marks 90 years since the Ocean County Library first opened in 1925, in a small cottage on the grounds of the county courthouse known as the Lonan Building. Its ori-

gin story is one of Ocean County residents taking action to fill an important need. First there was a petition created by the Ocean County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations' Committee on the County Library, and then there was a question on the ballot in the general election of 1924, which voters overwhelmingly approved.

Back then, the first borrowing system was via "book mobile," a Model T panel truck that delivered reading materials to schools, post offices, stores, private homes and Coast Guard stations.

"We were all over," geographically speaking, according to the library's media liaison, Sal Ottaviano. The first official branch, he said, was on Long Beach Island.

Today, the library system comprises 21 branches that serve 32 municipalities, still thriving in its role at the heart of the community, enriching lives through reading and learning.

In celebration of the 90th anniversary, all year from February through November, each month is dedicated to a different decade of the library's history. Beginning with the '20s in February, the '30s in March, and so on, through the '90s in September, the "20-aughts" in October and the present-day 'teens in November.

"As we pay tribute to each decade, we have events that correspond," Ottaviano explained. Among those events are musical performances, historical presentations, movie screenings, children's activities and arts-related exhibitions.

The climax of the yearlong celebration will take place on Saturday, Sept. 26, with the Great Gatsby Gala, for which Mancini Hall at the library headquarters in downtown Toms River will be transformed into the Gatsby mansion and guests are



Sparks, the long-time Ocean County Library mascot delivering a basket full of 90th Anniversary dolls (July 2015), now available to everyone. Photo credit: Ocean County Library

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encouraged to dress in their most elegant art deco- or flapper-style attire. Proceeds from ticket sales (\$75 per person) will support the Ocean County Library Foundation, which sponsors many of the anniversary-related events. Tickets can be purchased online or at the Toms River branch, Ottaviano said.

In terms of population, diversity and technology, he said, “our library’s growth and success have mirrored the growth of Ocean County,” growing each decade in the number of branches and borrowers. Library headquarters had several locations over the years, but since 1981 it has been in its present address at 101 Washington St.

“We’ve been able to provide the newest services,” he said, all the while remaining “a gateway to knowledge and support for residents’ desire for personal growth.”

In an increasingly paperless world, the good news is: “People still like books,” he said.

But the library is so much more than just books. Cardholders can download e-books, periodicals and other resources using the mobile app, available through theoceancountylibrary.org. The website also offers educational courses and tutorials in basic and professional subject areas including language studies, via Lynda; magazines, with streaming media, via Zinio, “the world’s largest newsstand”; even wireless printing.

“As things change, the Ocean County Library is right there, offering these technologies,” he said.

In each of its communities, the library is also a gathering place, where neighbors come together to share in special events and experiences, putting the library’s motto into practice: “Connecting People, Building Community, and Transforming Lives.”

And in every branch, children and teens have their own sections to browse and explore, as well as age-appropriate events that are both educational and fun, “so there’s a nice balance.”

Throughout the year so far, some highlights have included the kickoff event Jan. 24, a visit from “Downton Abbey” creator Lord Julian Fellowes’ niece, author Jessica Fellowes, who came from England to give a talk about her companion book series. The event, held in Bishop Hall at library headquarters, drew an estimated 250 to 300 people, Ottaviano said – many enjoyed the VIP experience with preferred seating and a meet-and-greet tea with Fellowes.

In April, the “George Burns Tonight” tribute featured Fran Docherty reminiscing about Burns’ life, from his childhood in New York City’s Lower East Side, to his career in vaudeville, radio and television, to his role as God in the popular ’80s “Oh, God” movies. That show took place at the Waretown and Lacey branches.

In June and July, the cast of “The Jersey Four” retraced the careers of The Four Seasons, singing such classics as “Sherry,” “Big Girls Don’t Cry,” “Ragdoll” and “Walk Like a Man,” accompanied by a 13-piece band. The group told stories and played Four Season trivia, with performances by The Party Dolls between sets. That event was hosted by the Long Beach Island and Manchester branches.

The individual libraries have had a lot of fun decorating in the themes of the given decades to add to the atmosphere surrounding the special events, Ottaviano said.

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Jersey Four performing this summer as part of the 90th anniversary celebration.
Photo credit: Ocean County Library



On Friday, Sept. 18, all the branches will host special birthday party-themed activities; “Sparks” the OCL mascot is now available as a plush doll to purchase at any branch for \$10. The month of September also brings a library card signup drive, as well as the “Food for Fines” program, whereby borrowers donate non-perishable food items (to benefit the Foodbank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties) in

exchange for a 50-cent credit per item toward their overdue fine balance.

“There’s a lot to do and enjoy,” he said.

The public response to the anniversary festivities has been very positive, Ottaviano said. People are happy to take part, because it’s a celebration not only of the library system as a whole, but also “a celebration of community, and the great things we share together.”

More information and updates can be found at theoceancountylibrary.org, as well as on Facebook and Twitter, and in the monthly brochure, which is available at all branches.

The Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission’s online presence is now broader and beefier and than ever!

The organization has long served as a storehouse for information and materials related to the history, art, people and places that define the county; it has always provided vital resources to local history and arts entities, as well as to the public. As a Division of the Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation, the Commission supports Parks Department events and activities, including the historic preservation of Cedar Bridge Tavern and the annual Decoy and Gunning Show.

With those objectives ever in mind, its website, co.ocean.nj.us/ch/, has risen to meet the needs of an increasingly digital world.

Since the creation of its periodical *Out & About Ocean County* in 2005, readers have come to expect regular installments of engaging content about a wide (and ever expanding!) range of topics that matter to Ocean County residents. Now, the entire archive – 10 years’ worth of articles, photographs and more – is accessible in one easy-to-find location on the World Wide Web.

On the homepage, users can look under the heading “Archives” and click the link they want to explore. See and read: all the signage along the Barnegat Branch Trail; stories from the annual Decoy and Gunning Show program books; a complete listing of every winner of the Hurley Conklin Award, complete with birth/ death dates and in-depth biographical accounts; and every article from every issue of *Out & About*.

That’s a lot of reading material to help deepen your knowledge and appreciation of the county you love. And, as always, a full calendar of events is there to help you plan your outings and enrichment. So get connected and get clicking! —V.F.