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Libraries by a River: Three Rural Libraries Join Forces to Improve the Customer Experience

by *Gina Persichini and Teresa Lipus*

“We just want the best possible service for our customers.”

These were the words spoken by Julie Woodford, Burley Public Library Director, at a meeting to discuss a new library consortium. The words perceptively describe the foundation upon which rural libraries in Idaho’s Magic Valley built a partnership to accomplish just that.

In 2003, Woodford and Sharon Kae Kimber of Rupert’s DeMary Memorial Library joined forces to build what would eventually become the Libraries By a River (LIBRI) System. The goal was to expand access to information for their customers; the tools they employed to build their vision were communication, cooperation, and courage.

They began by reaching out to their neighbors. After inviting area school librarians to join the investigation, they set out to learn about library networking in Idaho. They visited with staff and librarians from the Valley Automation Library Network (VALNet), Lynx! Consortium, West End Library Consortium (WELCOM), and Library Consortium of Eastern Idaho (LCEI)—all shared library networks in operation in Idaho. Through interviews and demonstrations they sought out potential opportunities for their libraries to join forces with others in an existing shared system. Despite their efforts, however, they were unable to find the right match.

While the Burley Public Library had been using an automated catalog for a number of years, the DeMary Memorial Library did not yet have one. So Kimber and her staff set about the arduous task of retrospective conversion. They had a collection to weed, inventory to count, and over thirty thousand items that needed MARC records, which would ultimately be used in the automated system. The process would take twelve hundred hours, utilizing extra staff hours, volunteer time, and grant funds through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA).

The staff at the DeMary library worked on retrospective conversion to be ready in case an opportunity arose to take the next step of getting a networking system in place. “Doing the retrospective conversion, there came a point when we were more able to search our own holdings faster and more efficiently within the OCLC site than we were using the card catalog. We have been guided by the staff at the Idaho Commission for Libraries [ICFL] in reaching our goal for automation and for this we express appreciation,” notes Kimber.

Meanwhile, the Burley Public Library staff found themselves running into difficulties while trying to improve the customer experience. Their current integrated library system (ILS) didn’t make allowances for library users to access their accounts or work with self-checkout tools, and staff had to create many workarounds in an effort to align the system with library procedures. It became clear that the existing system would not allow the library to grow and expand. Located in south-central Idaho, the proximity needed to join an existing consortium that would suit their smaller community needs began to look problematic.

In 2007, the Burley and DeMary Memorial library directors ramped up their efforts to create more consistent service in their

neighboring communities. They set out a plan for a shared automated ILS and applied for LSTA grant funds to put it in place. Just as the funding was granted, a third library entered the conversation. Laura Burnett, Jerome Public Library Director, was experiencing a lot of the same problems with their existing ILS. Customers wanted to access the catalog from home, place holds, and have a 24/7 library experience.

The Jerome library applied for the necessary additional LSTA funding, joined the other two libraries, and together they christened the LIBRI System. Burnett explains, "After hearing from Julie about what she and Sharon were doing, I immediately wanted Jerome to join them. I took the idea to our board, they committed the matching funds (along with some generous donors in the community), and I got to writing the Just in Time grant to make it happen on their timeline."

One of traits of the LIBRI consortium is consistency. The three libraries, along with their staff and trustees, worked together to align policies, providing as much consistency as possible throughout their service area. After tackling difficult issues like fines, non-resident fees, and check-out periods, the libraries were able to move forward on implementing the technology. A contract was secured for a system that best met the needs of these small, rural libraries. With small staffs and limited technological assistance locally, they decided upon a hosted version of SirsiDynix's Symphony ILS. They contracted with local expertise to brush up on best practices for cataloging and authority control. After six months of a fast-paced timeline and a very high learning curve, the system went live on August 20, 2009.

"This becomes intriguing when you see the possibilities," Woodford says. "When our first box of materials was shipped out, I was being a bit territorial of Burley's materials leaving home. Then I noticed that some of the materials were items that may have been weeded because they were not circulating. The next piece of excitement occurred when I saw what materials our customers were borrowing from the other libraries. I realized that our customers had gained more materials and that we might have some extra shelf space. As we work through the intricacies of a new system, I now have two dedicated, committed partners to work with. The library staffs are working together and it eases the workload. We're just starting to realize how much synergy we can create with three entities versus one, even outside of the automation system. The customer comments are all positive!"

"To go from a card catalog to the SirsiDynix Symphony ILS has been and continues to be a gigantic leap for the staff and for our patrons." Kimber explains. Woodford agrees, adding, "Going through an automation process like this is life changing. It requires so much time and dedication all the way around. The company we worked with was marvelous; they had to do some real hand-holding in my opinion, but they helped us through. The ICFL was also a great supporter to help us understand up front what we would be facing."

"And we're. . . still in the training curve," Woodford continues. "I'm confident that we'll get it, but we're not there yet. We have an excellent support system between the two partners, a more than willing staff, an understanding library board, and a very helpful ILS company. . . I'm glad we made the decision to do this. It will be a tool that helps the libraries to serve their customers in the future. Today we're working to refine, refine, refine. At Burley we've still got quite a bit of clean-up work."

Kimber concludes, "Many of our customers have expressed their approval of the new system. When we tell them what they can do from their computer and also that the card is good at not just this library but at all three of the libraries, they are impressed. And it can only get better from here."

As the Burley Public, DeMary Memorial, and Jerome Public libraries collaborate to refine their processes and discover new possibilities with the LIBRI System, the synergetic partnership they've developed will move them towards their vision of improving library service to their communities. Burnett speaks for all three when she says, "Our motto 'Libraries Working Together' sums up the essence of what we have accomplished and will continue to bloom with possibilities as we go into the future."

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