

60 YEARS OF MAKING GREAT LIBRARIES

JAN RICHARDS, manager of Central West Libraries, which is based in and around the town of Orange in NSW, reflects on what it takes to provide a great library service.

Last month, ALIA invited me to answer the question 'What makes your library amazing?' I had my own opinion, but Central West Libraries (CWL) belongs to the 64 fabulous staff and to our wider communities and stakeholders. So I threw the question out to them. This is our story.

In November this year we will celebrate 60 years since the establishment of CWL, a regional service spread across five local government areas and 15,348 square kilometres on the Central West Slopes of NSW. In 1957 the library's collection consisted of just books, but today our members have an ever-increasing range of resource choices.



Lyn Bugden, Peter Douglass, Joan Barry, Victoria Prestwidge

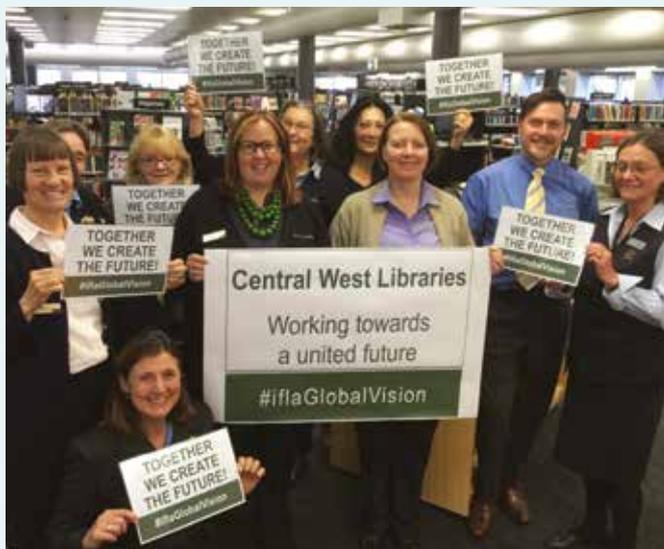
Collectively these staff from all CWL branches have many years public library experience

What hasn't changed in the last 60 years is the centrality of our people in making the service successful and adopting a tailored approach to each of our multiple communities. One staff member reflected:

'Sure, we have a wonderful collection with a terrific cross-section of material, but I believe it's the interaction with the community that helps to make a great library service. My last two weeks here at Molong have reminded me that, while people are coming here to borrow books, magazines and DVDs, many are also looking for someone to talk to for a couple minutes, or to catch up with each other, or to read the newspaper, or a place for their child to sit and read a book or be read to.'

This observation is reinforced by the thoughts of our members. When asked what made us special, they responded, 'It's what you offer and the staff who implement these services that make CWL a great service. It's their professionalism, attention to detail and enthusiasm.'

In its 60-year history, the library has had only three managers (all still alive): Frank Millington, who established the regional service; Joan Barry, who was a library assistant on opening day and who succeeded Frank in 1969; and me, Jan Richards, who first started working at the library as an 18-year-old in 1972. I left a couple of years later before returning as manager in the mid-1990s. Longevity must



Central West Libraries staff participate in the IFLA Global Visioning process

be part of the library's DNA, as many of our team have enviable service records.

The key to our strength is our team. Many of us have been together for a long time, but this year we really tested the relationship by – almost simultaneously – taking on a major refurbishment, introducing RFID and convening a major conference. What were we thinking? But we've emerged at the other end, still smiling and perhaps a little heavier from all the chocolate we consumed to survive. To quote Caroline Eisenhauer from Cowra: 'It was fun and exhausting but exhilarating to be part of a bigger team project with great results.'

Being based in a regional area, there is a danger of limited professional development (PD) opportunities available to staff. To keep ahead of the game, we therefore seek alternative ways of engaging with the wider LIS community. In this we are lucky to be part of the highly collaborative NSW public library network and have the support of the State Library of NSW. Shared PD programs within our region and assistance to attend events in the Sydney metropolitan area allow us to participate in communities of practice at a regional, state, national and international level.

To enhance this participation, for a number of years we have encouraged staff to participate in ALIA's PD Scheme, which provides another option for lifelong learning. The scheme is particularly beneficial for staff working in our smaller libraries, where they have limited professional interaction. To facilitate their participation, we enter into a contract with staff whereby the library pays their ALIA membership and they actively pursue the PD agenda supported by ALIA's monthly PD Postings newsletter. They are encouraged to share their thoughts and discoveries with their colleagues, and feedback on the process is discussed at the annual performance appraisal. In a busy world, there is always the temptation to pop

the PD reading and reflections on the to-do pile, but we have lessened this by the appointment of a champion (our Technical Services Librarian, Ros Dorsman), who provides additional reading and suggestions and reminds everyone to complete their MyPD Tracking Tool.

Feedback from staff who have accepted the PD offer is universally positive. 'It re-energises my commitment to providing the public with a great, interesting, knowledgeable and up-to-date service,' said one participant. Another said, 'I can read about the great things that are happening in other libraries in Australia and around the world.' From a management perspective, this step is a practical and cost-effective way of supporting staff and ensuring an informed and engaged workforce.

Library staff in regional communities are the public face of the service. They are known by name, considered as friends and are widely recognised wherever they go. Without a doubt they are our most valuable resource. They should be nurtured and their contribution celebrated. 🌟

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