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# Striving for Success: Breaking the Barriers in an Inner-City Library

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## Introduction

"Those neighborhood kids are worthless." "Kids lack respect for everyone."



"What's wrong with that kid's parents?" "That music is rotting their brains." Statements like these are often heard in inner-city neighborhoods. These attitudes, coupled with the poverty and racial barriers faced by today's children, can help

to drive children out of the educational process and into drugs, gangs or jail. The inner-city library has many barriers to overcome in serving the children of today as they develop into productive and responsible adults of tomorrow. This article discusses problems presented and offers some solutions as the Brightwood Branch of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library becomes more involved in its neighborhood.

## A Brief Sketch of Brightwood Branch Library

The Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library serves over 750,000 people with a central library, twenty-one branches and two bookmobiles. The Children's Services Office supports the Children's Librarians with system-wide programming including the Summer Reading Program, November Read-Aloud, and Read-the-Zoo, as well as centralized selection and support services for

agency needs, i.e. hook-and-loop stories, puppets, other supplemental materials, and additional staff.

The Brightwood Branch Library is a storefront-inner-city library with just over 2,400 square feet of public space and a total book collection of 18,000 volumes. Juvenile materials account for approximately 7,000 of the titles. The staff consists of an adult services librarian, a children's librarian, one full-time support staff, two part-time clerks, and two pages who work twenty hours per week. Brightwood has no meeting room or auditorium facility for programming or community groups. We use the storytelling rug for children's "storytimes," while other programming involves moving tables and chairs to accommodate large groups.

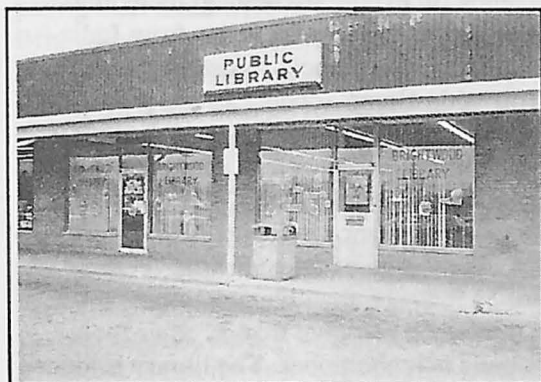
Brightwood's juvenile materials accounted for 55 percent of the total non-video circulation in 1992, and it appears that it will be about the same percentage for 1993. Videos account for 25 percent to 33 percent of the total monthly circulation, yet patrons who come in for videos allow their children to get books when the opportunity might not have presented itself otherwise.

## Meeting the Challenges of the Brightwood Library

A brief socioeconomic profile of the Brightwood Branch Library reveals that it serves over 20,500 people,<sup>1</sup> of which 96 percent are from minority groups.<sup>2</sup> The number of people living below the poverty level rose from 27.2 percent in 1980 to 33.2

percent in 1990.<sup>3</sup> Also, 44.6 percent of the residents in the neighborhood are non high-school graduates, and the unemployment rate is 11 percent.<sup>4</sup> The average per capita income in the neighborhood is \$7,894,<sup>5</sup> and in the last ten years, the number of female heads of households has increased from 40.3 percent to 45.8 percent.<sup>6</sup> However, as bleak as these figures sound, the neighborhood is full of people concerned with education, creating a safer neighborhood, and making better lives for themselves and their families.

An inner-city library by definition faces its own unique challenges. Because Brightwood is a storefront library, it has very low visibility. There is no separate building with signage, parking, and lighting to declare the existence of a library.



Unlike the property owners in a Vigo County mall branch library, Brightwood's property management *does* allow temporary store window announcements and advertisements.<sup>7</sup> These promotional materials are invaluable in getting information out to the public. The Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library system also advertises all branches' activities through its Public Relations Office, which not only publishes *Reading in Indianapolis*, but also issues press releases in daily papers and in over eighty media/community outlets.

A bus stop in front of the strip mall in which the library is located allows patrons some transportation to the library, but walk-ins still comprise a significant amount of the

library's business. Neighboring businesses attract potential library patrons who drop by while shopping for groceries or using the laundromat. Parents often drop their children off at the library while running these errands.

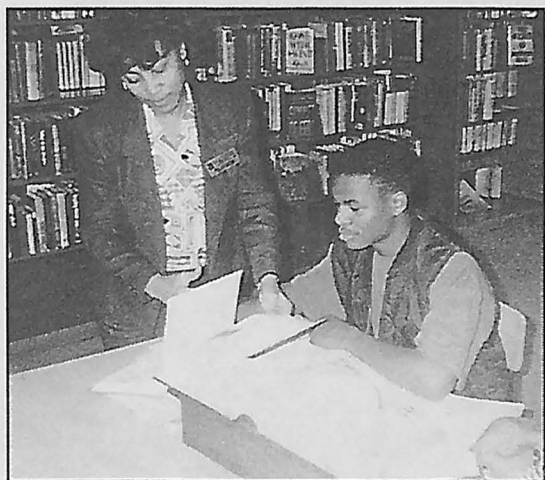
To establish a safe and friendly place for children, there is an inviting juvenile area full of wood blocks, bead mazes, a Lego® table, and puzzles that keep children occupied. In addition, these items help to develop proficiency in classification, spatial and positional concepts and pre-reading skills, while social growth occurs as children play and learn together.



Until 1993, the Brightwood Branch consistently had the lowest patron usage counts and circulation figures in the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library System. This resulted in a drastically restricted book budget of \$13,000 per year. Centralized selection is the key to using limited funds wisely. The Juvenile Collection Development Librarian at the Central Library has a detailed description of the Brightwood Branch and profile of the neighborhood on file to assist in choosing material.

The library receives duplicates of African American-related materials. "Coffee table" books do not circulate well and are not purchased. In a combined effort with the centralized selection process, the library is aggressively weeding its juvenile collection. The book collection was at 7,550 titles in January 1993. In November 1993, it stood at 7,016, just over the goal of 7,000.

Unlike some storefront libraries,<sup>8</sup> Brightwood has special collections that specifically address its community's interests. In considering the neighborhood's racial configuration, the library cultivated its heaviest collection development concentration in African American literature. All works



by, about, and for African Americans have identifying spine labels affixed to increase the recognition of these titles for both children and adults. Realizing this, Martin University, a local predominately Black college, sends its students to the Brightwood Branch Public Library to do research on African American issues, as their own library is still growing. Brightwood is also creating a vertical file of information about Black colleges and Indiana universities.

Latchkey children come to the library as neighborhood families are forced by lower average wages to work two jobs to make ends meet. The library is unable to offer a daily storytime for children, but does offer a safe place for a few hours. Behavior is not a serious problem. If children misbehave, they are "excused" from the library promptly. This seems to be enough incentive for most children to show appropriate behavior. Gangs, drugs and alcohol are kept out of the Library through active discouragement of colors, beepers, and other gang/drug-related paraphernalia.

Most area daycare centers bring children to the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Libraries to receive service. At Brightwood, only one daycare center in four is able to visit the library for its bi-monthly programs. Brightwood serves four daycare centers, one Headstart program, and two kindergarten classes, thus providing fourteen monthly storytime sessions which account for almost 100 miles of driving by the library staff each month.

Other Brightwood outreach efforts include: fifteen visits yearly to three Indianapolis public schools, providing library services at community events, acting as the Brightwood representative for township schools, and as the liaison for the local Boys and Girls Clubs. In addition, the library provides some community services in-agency (in the library branch) including serving students on field trips from Indianapolis public schools, assisting the Perry Township Home School Liaison program, serving community, latchkey, and employment programs, as well as various local churches and the Marion County Juvenile Detention Center.

As the figures quoted earlier in this article indicate, the illiteracy rate in Brightwood is higher than in other Indianapolis neighborhoods. The library is vigorously working on the adult literacy problem by being a satellite branch of the Greater Indianapolis Literacy League and serving as the Literacy Office of the library. Literacy volunteers and students meet in the library several times a week. The library also hosts school tutor/student sessions weekly.

Once we have succeeded in drawing patrons into the Brightwood library, how do we get them to return? Successful programming is our solution and it takes an active, vocal effort on the part of staff — librarians and clerks alike.

The number one children's programming event of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library system is the Summer Reading Program, which has corporate sponsor-



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ship by the Lilly Foundation and Wendy's Restaurants. Prior to my arrival at Brightwood in 1992, there were 742 participants in the Summer Reading Program. This year, our participation grew to 1,115, an increase of 50 percent which represents the largest increase in any library in the system. Zip code tracking of program participants revealed that over 93 percent were from the Brightwood service area. This indicates that we are reaching deeper into our own inner-city population and retaining a greater portion of the neighborhood's children from year to year.

Studies of participation by age show that almost 40 percent of the participants were in the targeted age groups of 0-5 years and 12-and-over. This is a significantly greater number of the targeted at-risk groups participating than there were in 1992. Overall, Brightwood serves children attending sixty-three Indianapolis public schools and sixty-four townships, both private and public schools, which impacts almost all of Marion County.

The second largest system-wide program is the November Read Aloud which is co-sponsored by Noble Roman's Pizza. Each year this program has a different theme—this year, dinosaurs. Participation from Brightwood has doubled over the last year from 573 to 1,200 plus, and is still climbing. Daycare centers account for 30 percent of the participation, providing 463 children. The timely dinosaur theme which is riding on the tail of the movie *Jurassic Park*, coupled with the incentive of free pizza, has increased both our patron participation counts and circulation figures.

The third largest system-wide program is Read-the-Zoo, a cooperative program between the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, the Indianapolis Zoo, and the *Indianapolis Star and News* newspaper. In 1992, Brightwood had twelve participants in the program. This year, 263 children registered. The reason for this increase was the inclusion of children from daycare centers, as

they accounted for over 40 percent of the total participation.

Brightwood also offers in-agency programs which are designed around the interests and needs of its community. Besides the monthly storytimes, programs have included a Kwanzaa celebration, several different African craft programs, several film series offered during the Summer Reading Program and seasonally, karate demonstrations, and FIRE!!!, an African American children's dance troupe.

Advertising involves sending over 1,700 flyers to local schools for each major program. We also distribute flyers to patrons, to our daycare centers, and to neighborhood businesses in order to inform and attract the greatest number of participants. This public relations work involves almost forty miles of driving and up to three hours of time each month.

The bottom line is that to reach the greatest number of children in its neighborhood, the Brightwood Branch Library has adopted an "outreach" posture. Since a great number of the children don't have the opportunity to come to the library, the Brightwood Branch takes the library to them.

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### Bibliography

Kempen, Darlene. "Vigo County Public Branch Libraries." *Indiana Libraries*. 9(1): 17-22 (1990).

### Endnotes

1. Batt, Sarah. *Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library Literacy Office Report*. 1993. Table 4, page 26.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. Table 2, p. 24
4. Ibid. Table 1, p. 23.
5. Ibid. Table 3, p. 25.
6. Ibid. Table 5, p. 27.
7. Kempen, Darlene. "Vigo County Public Branch Libraries." *Indiana Libraries*. 9(1):18-19 (1990).
- 8 Ibid. p. 21.