

# St. Joseph County Public Library: 125 Years and Growing By Jennifer Zent

The Summer Reading Program has developed into a cornerstone for the St. Joseph County Public Library (SJCPL) over the years. What was once a group of librarians spreading the importance of reading through storytimes and book suggestions has now turned into a community-wide challenge to encourage children, teens, and adults to log their reading and participate in programs throughout our entire system.

Because we look toward this annual event as a means of reinforcing the idea that the library is an educational institution valuing the success of its patrons, young and old, we decided to pair the launch of our 2014 program with SJCPL's 125th anniversary.

The idea was to create a festive atmosphere while making our brand and significance undeniable. We wanted to challenge everyone to keep reading throughout vacation time and, as a result, make SJCPL a destination. Our 125th celebration afforded us the opportunity to start off the Summer Reading Program with a party that encouraged people to register in the early stages. As an incentive, the first 400 people who signed up received a bright green t-shirt with our 125th logo on the front and the catch phrase, "Check Me Out" with a graphic of a barcode, on the back.

Each branch had 125th anniversary bracelets to hand out to those who signed up at their locations. They also catered to their communities by creating programs during the same week of the kick-off party so there was a unified attempt at getting the word out about the importance of summer reading for all ages.

The party itself was held in our parking lot in conjunction with Downtown South Bend's First Fridays event that centers around various themes. The sign-up table was staffed and boasted a large line for the first two hours. We partnered with WVPE and Sunny 101.5, both advertising on their radio stations, and did several on-air television appearances with our NBC and PBS affiliates.

Activities at the event were all means to further establish our name in the community. Children created paper bag hats with stamps and stickers (something that was easy and allowed for high visibility as they walked around town), people immediately donned their t-shirts and staff had their own shirts with the SJCPL logo and fun quotes such as, "May the Library be With You" and "There's no place like the library."

Additionally, we unveiled our urban garden and had a small

ribbon cutting ceremony that allowed for Aaron Perri, the executive director of Downtown South Bend, Inc., to share a few words about the value of SJCPL as a resource and space where people can congregate. We also had the winners of our teen poetry contest (they were encouraged to write on the themes of books, libraries, gardens, anniversaries and celebrations) read their selected pieces.

Promoting this contest gave us a built-in audience the day of the event, but also provided us with another means of outreach to discuss Summer Reading with area schools in the months leading up to our kick-off. Ultimately, we had eight readers and 50+ present during the garden dedication.

The success of this event wasn't just in the fact that we had a 15 percent increase in Summer Reading participation over the previous year, but in the partnerships we created while supporting our initiative. It was also the smiles and photos on social media. And the t-shirts that we still see around town that continue to remind us of that special day. Our relevance depends on programming that is intertwined with the community in such a manner. It's our way of reaching out a hand and saying, "Come along for the ride."

We're so glad they did... and continue to do so.

## Bio:



Jennifer has held a position at the St. Joseph County Public Library for almost four years. Prior to her current role, she worked at a prominent bookstore planning events and establishing strong relationships with schools and area organizations. She continues to use those skills as she promotes SJCPL's various initiatives. An avid reader, she believes books are not only a source of knowledge and creativity, but a means for us to understand each other's experiences better.