

Librarians ‘hablo español’

Area libraries carry materials in different languages, offer services

By Jill Fuller

There are two signs on Hope Kramer’s office window at the Oconomowoc Public Library. One reads “Diverse, Inclusive, Accepting, Welcoming, Safe Space for Everyone.” Another says, “Hablo español.”

Kramer is the head of Reference, Adult Services and Cataloging at the library. She helps library patrons with a variety of research and technical needs, plans programs for adults, and orders materials for the library’s collection. She also assists Spanish-speakers who come into the library with translation needs. Kramer, who speaks Spanish at a high intermediate level, is one of two library staff members at the Oconomowoc Public Library who offer language translation assistance. (The other staff member translates for German-speaking patrons).

Among other tasks, Kramer has assisted individuals and families in everything from applying for library cards, to purchasing airline tickets, to providing basic translation for school forms. In this capacity, Kramer focuses on showing and explaining how to do something, rather than doing the task for the patron.

“People are so thankful,” Kramer says, “to have someone who can assist them in their language and always tell me how much they appreciate me being here. I have built relationships with a few families in the community who know that the library

is a safe place to come for help and that I’ll be able to assist them in locating information.”

Kramer also directs patrons to the library’s collection of Spanish language resources and pamphlets on a variety of topics, such as tax help and health issues. In addition to its Spanish collections of books, movies, and more, the Oconomowoc library has also built up a language collection that includes materials in Mandarin, Italian, Russian and Swahili, among others.

“These are all languages that are represented in our community and/or are taught in the local schools,” Kramer said.

Why does this matter? Because libraries, almost more than any other American institution, are built on the principle that everyone is welcome. As it states in the Library Bill of Rights, adopted by the American Library Association, “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.” One aspect of that is straddling the language barrier.

In the last 15 years, the Hispanic population in Wisconsin has increased 95 percent. Though many families are bilingual, there is still a need to offer materials and services in more than one language. Most libraries, including those in Waukesha County, now offer collections of books, movies, CDs, magazines and more in Spanish; bilingual marketing materials, library forms and story times are other creative solutions libraries across the country are implementing to be more inclusive. Like Kramer,

library staff members are a crucial part of bridging language gap.

For example, the Waukesha Public Library offers Spanish assistance and has staff members who speak Hindi and French. The Elm Grove Public Library has a staff member who speaks Spanish, while a staff member at Menomonee Falls Public Library translates for Serbian-speaking patrons.

In talking about the benefits and rewards of her job, Kramer identified why providing access to multiple languages and language translation services is so essential to a library’s mission of equal access and opportunity.

“We all know how stressful it can be when we have a form that has a deadline or an information need that we aren’t sure how to locate accurate information for. Adding a language barrier on top of that makes it more difficult. So I’m able to provide another layer of customer service onto the amazing stuff we already do at the library,” she said.

(Jill Fuller is coordinator of marketing & communications for the Bridges Library System.)



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