

# Libraries are essential 'Palaces for the People'

A year after the pandemic began, I now understand a playground isn't simply a swing and slides; it's a place to meet new people who turn into friends. The walking trail near my house isn't merely beautiful; it connects me to my city and friendly faces as I stroll along. The library isn't just a place where we get books, but a space where my son can play, I can work quietly and we can talk to people as we wait to check out materials. This year, I value the

public places around me more than I ever did.

In his seminal 2018 book, "Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life", sociologist Eric Klinenberg states that most people, regardless of their class, race, age or political



Fuller

persuasion, believe "their communities feel weaker." Social isolation has been a feature of communities long before the pandemic hit. In figuring out the reason, Klinenberg turns to the concept of "social infrastructure." He defines social infrastructure as any physical place that allows community members to interact in a public area, like libraries, parks, community gardens, athletic fields and schools. He shows that these communal areas are vital because they foster the formation of social ties between people who live near each other, helping people feel personally invested in the places they live.

The book highlights studies and examples showing that robust social infrastructure plays a significant role in enhancing health and wellbeing, reducing crime, and contributing to the economic growth of a city, neighborhood, or community. It's a compelling case for something we have come to understand intimately this year: we need our neighbors. We need connection to thrive.

Public libraries are critical to fostering this connection, according to Klinenberg. "Libraries ... are essential not only for a neighborhood's vitality but also for buffering all kinds of personal problems — including isolation and loneliness," Klinenberg writes. During the pandemic, the libraries in Waukesha County heard from patrons who depend on their library for information, entertainment and connection to others. Grandparents attended virtual library programs with grandchildren who live far away. Book club members

used their virtual meeting time to talk with each other, not only to discuss books.

Though library use across the country has increased in the past few years, Klinenberg points out that funding at a local or national level has not increased at the same pace to meet the demand. Local, state and federal support is crucial to ensuring the longevity of social infrastructure, including libraries. For example, as more people return to using library buildings in person, many libraries are facing the need for updated and accessible facilities. Better meeting and programming spaces, collaborative work spaces, self-service options, and increased accessibility to technology will allow libraries to better serve the needs of their communities.

If you're interested in supporting your library as a vital piece of community social infrastructure, consider contacting your senators to voice your support for the Build Libraries Act, which would enable libraries to rebuild, refurbish and expand their facilities — as well as improve our digital infrastructure and purchase devices — to meet community needs.

As our country continues to grapple with the economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, we must look forward and begin to craft solutions to support everyone in our community. As trusted centers of community life and essential infrastructure, libraries are a perfect place to start.

*(Jill Fuller is the marketing & communications librarian for the Bridges Library System. She can be reached at [jfuller@bridgeslibrarysystem.org](mailto:jfuller@bridgeslibrarysystem.org).)*

## CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

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