



# Shifting Gears ... It's How We Roll

Minnesota's Award-Winning BookBike

HEATHER ACERRO

In April 2015, Rochester (MN) Public Library (RPL) launched its BookBike, a bicycle-powered outreach cart filled with books, library information, and fun giveaways. RPL works with a service population of 141,985 in Olmsted County, through an 85,470-square-foot downtown library and a Bookmobile.

From April through December 2015, during its first nine months in operation, our BookBike and staff visited 117 events, welcomed 6,546 visitors, circulated 713 items, answered 1,186 reference questions, and created 62 library cards. Materials and services provided on the BookBike include materials to check out, library card applications, library event schedules, local bike trail maps, library brochures and program promotions, and education on accessing digital materials. Like all good ideas, we borrowed pieces of our program from other libraries already successfully offering bicycle outreach.

## Bicycle Outreach in Minnesota? Seriously?

In 2012, RPL utilized community input to create a new strategic plan, core values, mission, and vision. This new set of guiding documents set us on a path toward more collaboration, community engagement, creativity, and outreach activities.

In late 2014, we were approached by We Bike Rochester, a local bicycle coalition, with the bicycle outreach idea, and we rode away with it. It sounded like a lot of fun and a good fit to connect with customers at parks and events in and near the downtown area. Due to the fact that we were already providing outreach at many outdoor summer events, we knew having a BookBike would help us to make more of an impact on the community and meet strategic goals to increase awareness and access to the library.

Since the BookBike is a program of our Youth Services Division, most of our outreach focuses on reaching children and families. We attend special events in the community, as well as offer a regular outreach schedule to local parks. Minnesota is famous for ridiculous windchills and mountains of snow, which means that when the sun is shining, everyone is outside soaking up as many rays as they can. During the winter, we provide services indoors, as our custom-built BookBike can be converted from bike trailer to push cart to use inside the walking skyway and subway system connected to our downtown library.

## Goals for the Road

RPL serves the residents of Olmsted County, all Minnesota library cardholders, and visitors to our community. Since

Top left: Rochester (MN) Public Library staff with the Local Government Innovation Award from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. Far right: Eric Tarr and Janna Alme on the road with RPL's BookBike. Bottom right: Keri Ostby and Heather Acerro staffing the BookBike.

Photos courtesy of Rochester Public Library.

Rochester is home to Mayo Clinic, the region attracts more than two million visitors each year. The goals of the BookBike Program are to

- reach new or inactive library customers;
- increase awareness of library programs and services;
- build relationships between RPL staff, neighbors, and community organizations;
- provide access to library materials to children and families where they gather;
- reduce transportation barriers;
- demonstrate how easy it is to get to our downtown library by bicycle; and
- meet visitors to share with them the services the library provides, including a low-cost visitor card.

## Funding the Ride

To launch the BookBike, we received just under \$7,000 in Community Collaboration grant funds from Southeast Libraries Cooperating (SELCO), which was funded with money from Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. With the grant money, we purchased most of the equipment needed to get the program on the road. For the seven-month planning and implementation period of the program covered by the grant, our project cost including the grant, in-kind staff, and partner time totaled more than \$31,000.

## Gear and Technology

After researching several bicycle outreach programs in the country to find the best model for our program, we settled on the trailer design used by Boston Public Library. The trailer is light when empty, holds more than one hundred items, hitches easily to a bike, and materials are completely enclosed while riding.

Street Smart Trailers of Boston built our trailer, modifying their design to make it push-cart convertible. Our in-house graphic



**Heather Acerro** is Head of Youth Services at Rochester (MN) Public Library.

designer created the logo and designed the vinyl wrap that we had installed locally after the trailer arrived.

Two bikes were purchased specifically for the program, one with a large frame for tall staff and one with a smaller frame. Hub skewers were installed on both bikes, making it easy to attach the trailer. It was important to purchase good quality bikes for staff to use while pulling the trailer uphill.

An iPad that runs SirsiDynix MobileCirc, a Wi-Fi hotspot, and Bluetooth scanner allow us to easily check out materials and create library cards on the spot. The iPad also enables us to easily track our reference and visitor statistics through a Google form and to show customers how to use our digital materials such as OverDrive, Zinio, and the library's website.

## Brake for Books

Since encountering the BookBike in the community should feel like a special day for customers, we purchased the newest and most popular titles to fill the cart. The items are shadowed in our catalog and cannot be placed on hold, so the only way to have access is through meeting the BookBike in person. We have just more than four hundred items in the BookBike collection that rotate in and out. The items are minimally processed and have a custom-made BookBike label to denote they are part of this special collection.

## As Easy as Riding a Bike

The BookBike is powered by seventeen staff from all over the library. Staff are always scheduled in pairs, one person to pull the trailer and another who rides along. We've found that it is nice to have two people out at events when things get busy.

All BookBike staff are trained in bicycle safety (that is, stopping while pulling a heavy trailer, riding on the road, operating trailer and bicycles), the technology, and general outreach practices. To increase safety and visibility, BookBike T-shirts were purchased for all BookBike participants, and helmets were purchased for those who needed one. Special insurance is not required to operate the BookBike, but staff must wear helmets and work in pairs.

In anticipation of a busy summer, drastic changes were made to the Youth Services programming schedule. We dropped several ongoing in-house summer programs to free up staff to operate the BookBike six to seven days a week. This strategy paid off, as Youth Services programming numbers, which include BookBike activities, rose 12.4 percent in 2015.

## Hey, Nice Bike!

A marketing plan was built into our grant process, and because of the BookBike's appeal, this was one of the easiest programs

we've ever promoted. Everyone in the community was excited and buzzing about the BookBike. Staff brainstormed a tagline "Shifting Gears...It's How We Roll," created the logo, developed posters, built a webpage, designed T-shirts, selected and branded giveaways (for example, books, bike lights, stickers, chalk), and wrote press releases. Once we had a consistent look and feel for the program and put the word out to local media, publicity took off.

A great example of its high profile is our experience at the Rochesterfest parade. RPL staff has participated in this local parade for years handing out candy, so kids have learned to call out "Candy!" when they see us coming. This summer with the BookBike along in the parade, kids called out "BookBike!" and "Books!"

## Rolling through Rochester

During our first summer, we took advantage of as many local festivals and events as possible. We also operated our own outreach schedule, visiting local parks within the one-mile radius of the library. We tried many different approaches to this schedule, experimenting to find out what works best, and by the end of the summer, we settled on a regular two-week outreach schedule to visit four different parks.

Two of the parks have large playgrounds and attract families from throughout the community; the other two are smaller neighborhood parks that see mostly kids and families walking from home. This allows us to balance outreach between the parks with large numbers of people and the parks with harder-to-reach populations.

## Paperwork, Paperwork, Paperwork

All good things come with a lot of paperwork, and we worked hard to track progress and meet our program goals. Each event has a program event sheet to tell the riders where they will be going and any necessary information. Follow up after the program includes a Google form for tracking statistics, successes, and concerns. With so many people operating the BookBike, this methodology ensured good communication between staff and the program coordinator.

## Honk if You Love the BookBike

During the grant period of April through June 2015, we surveyed customers with an email evaluation form and found that most visitors just happened upon the BookBike at a park or event; they had not planned to visit. Of the people surveyed, 58 percent indicated they learned something new about the library at the BookBike, and 98 percent rated their service experience as "Good" to "Outstanding."



The BookBike has generated a lot of good feelings. Children used a map and our webpage schedule to track our movement throughout the summer; others showed up at the park before our scheduled time just so they could watch the staff set up; and one child visited the library almost every day to ask about the BookBike. Riding the BookBike through downtown creates a welcome spectacle and people wave, point, and smile.

## First-Place Finisher!

In October 2015, the BookBike program was named the City Category winner of the Local Government Innovation Award, presented by the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. This award recognizes organizations who innovate with creative, sustainable, and collaborative projects. We were honored to be a recipient, as well as to receive a \$5,000 grant from the Bush Foundation. A professional video of our BookBike was created and can be found on RPL's website at [www.rochesterpubliclibrary.org/my-rpl/bookbike](http://www.rochesterpubliclibrary.org/my-rpl/bookbike).

## On the Read Again: 2016 Plans

Until the weather warms up enough, the BookBike will operate as an indoor push-cart, visiting a coffee shop twice a week. As we gear up for intensive outreach, we will be weeding the collection to get rid of damaged items or things that have fallen out of popularity, purchasing the newest and best books, and planning our outreach schedule. The bicycles will come out of storage in April and get tuned up, new staff will be recruited and trained, and the program schedule will be finalized. We plan to use our Bush Foundation grant to purchase an Art and Learning trailer from Street Smart Trailers, which will include a fold-out activity table and space to store programming supplies. We will be able to carry outdoor play equipment such as balls, flying disks, and jump ropes as well as art supplies and early literacy activities. We anticipate a fun and active season ahead.

RPL is excited to be part of this growing movement of bicycle outreach. As libraries and communities change, it is important to get out and meet people where they gather to create readers, and to keep readers engaged. Ride on! 🚲



Books on Bikes connects books with readers in Charlottesville, Virginia.

## Other Libraries Jump on the "Bikewagon!"

Rochester Public Library was not the first library to provide bicycle outreach; they had many libraries from which to gather ideas. The one thing that all bicycle outreach programs have in common is that they are each uniquely

created to fit the staff and community they serve. From the selection of equipment, materials carried, or schedule they run, each program is tailored for what makes sense.

- Oak Park Public Library in Illinois uses their **Paperback Rider** tricycle to check out materials to customers as well as provide pop-up library programming such as storytimes or STEAM activities.
- Austin (TX) Public Library operates **unbound: sin fronteras** to connect library customers with materials and share information about the city's bicycle master plan.
- Berkeley (CA) Public Library's **Library on Wheels** offers not only books to check out, but also circulates movies and runs a Wi-Fi hotspot for public use.
- One standout example of bicycle outreach is the **Books on Bikes** program in Charlottesville, Virginia. This program, operated by volunteer teachers and librarians during the summer months, delivers free books on cargo bikes to the community. Funded through donations and a partnership with the local public library, the mission of this program is to create readers by connecting kids with books they love. Volunteers spend time with the children and families, building relationships and connections in the community. Looking toward the future, Books on Bikes hopes to expand by adding chapters throughout the country. For more information, visit <http://booksonbikesville.org>.
- For about one year, the Brown County (WI) Library (BCL) has operated a **Book Bike** as part of outreach



Brown County Library Children's Librarian Katie Guzek and Library Associate Angela Zuidmulder take the BCL Book Bike to a local park.

programming. It has been used in parades and for special programming; for example, one of their librarians took it out to a local pool to read to the kids during the pool-cleaning break; another visited a local brewery to familiarize people with the library's ebook offerings. At the local Open Streets event last year, when several streets were closed on a Saturday to encourage bikers, a librarian toured the bike around. BCL Librarian Mary Krauss said, "It has encouraged lots of second-glances and has been a positive talking-point for all staff about the library!"



Margarita Engle, center, was the winner of the 2016 Charlotte Zolotow Award from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) in Madison, Wisconsin, for her book *Drum Dream Girl*. She is joined by Wisconsin authors Kevin Henkes and Miranda Paul, whose books *Waiting* and *Water is Water*, respectively, were listed as "highly commended" titles for the award. Photo by Baptiste Paul.