

Curiosity Creates

A View from Behind the Lens

PAULA HOLMES WITH THOMAS HOLMES

In August 2016, I was hired as the outside evaluator for the ALSC Curiosity Creates Grants sponsored by Disney, whose donation of \$800,000 enabled ALSC to undergo a mini-grant program to fund up to seventy-seven libraries.

As a former member and chair of ALSC Library Service to Special Population Children and their Caregivers, grants were not wholly unfamiliar territory, but the scale of the project was. Public libraries had a little over five weeks to apply, due to the sponsor's revised timeline, for mini-grants for up to \$7,500 per recipient library. To be awarded, libraries needed to synthesize the research material in the Center for Childhood Creativity's paper, *Inspiring a Generation to Create: Critical Components of Creativity in Children* (www.centerforchildhoodcreativity.org) and create or expand an existing program for children ages 6 to 14, which focused on encouraging one or more components of creativity.

The evaluation rubric gave weight to projects that included collaboration, outreach, inclusion, and diversity. There is no doubt that children's librarians are creative, work well under pressure, and can do incredible and important things with a limited budget. As this grant showed, they can formulate and

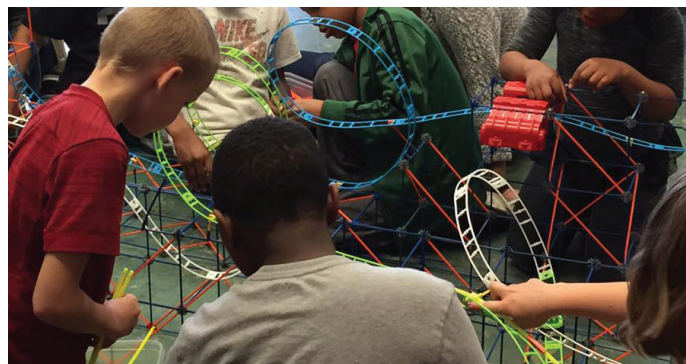
implement a plan to complete ambitious goals to serve all children. The response was overwhelming—432 applications from all over the United States were received, and, since some libraries requested less than the maximum amount, seventy-nine grants were awarded.

My role as the outside evaluator was to create a sampling of best practices through a limited amount of site visits along with communication via emails and phone calls. An additional component was to assist in the creation of a digital media product. Where to begin with a plethora of incredible projects? How to develop a game plan, noting that logistically and geographically it would be impossible to visit all seventy-nine extremely worthy programs? In October 2015, I began contacting the grant recipients, and what happened after that started one of the most incredible years of my life.

For me, the power of Curiosity Creates projects became apparent when I saw it from behind the camera lens with my son, Thomas. I conducted eight site visits, visiting the Carnegie Library of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, three times due to its proximity to my home. My first scouting visit deftly pointed out that I couldn't interview, observe, and film at the same time.



Paula Holmes is the Fiscal Officer for the Association for Library Service to Children and a member of the Upper St. Clair Township (PA) Library Board. Her son **Thomas Holmes** recently graduated from Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts.



These photos are from The Carnegie Library of Beaver Falls Building Up: Architecture Program

Luckily, I had access to a free film and new media college student in my own household. Before filming their program *Building Up: Architecture*, Library Director Jean Barsotti and children's librarian Christine Kroger introduced my son and me to the children and staff from TRAILBlazers afterschool program, explaining that this program was funded by ALSC and sponsored by Disney.

At that moment everything changed for me. Hands quickly went up. The question that I would carry with me throughout the project was asked by a young girl, "Will Disney see me?" My response was, "That is my goal." It is my continued goal for everyone to see the power of creativity programming for children at the library and the persuasive outcomes that can be achieved by all. The camera provides a tool to share and document in a visual format, while enhancing and enlivening data and statistics.

Most of our filming was conducted in an operating library. We didn't slip in on a day it was closed, and we didn't have the grant recipients, partners, or families read from a script; everything happened in the moment. For us, there were great rewards as well as challenges from this method. In West Hartford, Connecticut, while we were rolling, capturing the essence of the creativity impact of In Be-Tween Trailer Team, an announcement went off unexpectedly, blasting ten minutes until closing. We hurried to film before the lights would go out, only to have to cut for the announcement that the library would be closing in five minutes. With adrenaline pumping, somehow a beautiful sound bite was captured before the building was plunged into darkness.

We weren't totally in control and that was OK. Know that volunteers will push the book cart back and forth between the camera and the interviewee. This happened at multiple locations, so be forewarned. These things happen. It's vexing, but on the other hand, live filming produces wonderful surprises. You won't always get what you planned, but there's a good chance you'll get more. People stepped up and told stories that we couldn't have imagined, as there was no indication on the application. We saw how meaningful the projects were to the children with many parents eager to share positive stories.

Curiosity Creates Resources

For more background and resources on the Curiosity Creates project, check out these resources:

Curiosity Creates website, 2015, Association for Library Service to Children, www.ala.org/alsc/curiositycreates

Curiosity Creates Grants video, 2016, Association for Library Service to Children, <http://bit.ly/curiosity-creates-youtube>

Curiosity Creates: Innovative Library Programming for Children, 2016, Paula Holmes for ALSC, <http://bit.ly/curiosity-creates-best-practices>

Inspiring a Generation to Create: Critical Components of Creativity in Children, 2015, Center for Childhood Creativity, <http://centerforchildhoodcreativity.org/research/published/>

At the end of the day, by putting individuals on the spot, you get visceral responses. The camera captured the honesty, emotion, and passion of interviewees. It recorded what inspired and drove the project without buzzwords and jargon. The on-camera responses have an authentic feel. One such example, of many, included Kari Ann St. Jean of Avon Public Library (CT) speaking about their Open Art Studio and the underlying philosophy that if you can afford crafts, you can do art in the library. It was not only passionate; it was mesmerizing.

The use of film for documenting library programming is an excellent tool to provide evaluators. The pulsating beat of Ken Cooks' YouTube videos, created by the Free Library of Philadelphia's Kensington Branch, with handmade titles designed by the kids, brings the audience, in this instance the evaluator, into an unforgettable creative experience. Ted McCoy of Springfield City (MA) Public Library shared the high-energy Rock the Stacks bucket drumming video and also impressed his library board with them. Morton-James Public Library's (NE) program Library Lockdown created an hour-length zombie film to complement the time limit for their escape room. A highlight of the film was the mock interview

with the Nebraska City chief of police, demonstrating a positive community building exercise with the library and the kids.

Two libraries captured their programs on video using them for professional training. Toledo Lucas County (OH) Public Library's Make U: Mobile Art Labs created instructional videos for their kits. The response from the librarians has been extremely positive. Sevier County (TN) Public Library System's Curiosity Creates @ Your Library posted how-to videos on YouTube for how to replicate several of their sessions, including quilt block, vinyl, and ceramic tile projects. An additional resource is the Fairy Tale STEM videos on the Orange County (FL) Library System website.

Another aspect of our experience was not what we saw from behind the camera, but a trend we observed during site visits.

These libraries all had a high degree of buy-in from the community, the administration, and their partnerships. One of the most heartening things to see was how partners and librarians had grown close to one another. We could see connections that weren't limited to the project itself. They had formed lasting relationships with discussions of more collaboration in the future. The final evaluations showed numerous examples of highly successful partnerships and one regret is that we could not capture all of these moments on film.

Hopefully, the examples included in this issue will inspire investigation of the Center for Childhood Creativity research, connections with one or more of the outstanding projects designed by Curiosity Creates recipients, and imagination and implementation of creativity possibilities. ☺



Save the Date!
Saturday, April 1, 2017

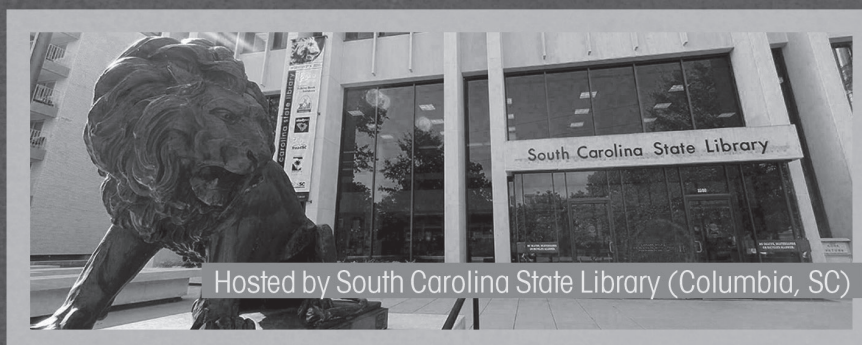
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