

# We Are Kenosha!

## A Grassroots Passive Program Fueled by an EJK Grant

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Inspiration struck, as it usually does, during a conference presentation. Though the specifics of the presentation (which presenters, library, and even the conference itself) are lost to now-defunct electronics, I know that the idea for my Ezra Jack Keats (EJK) Mini-Grant proposal originated in that moment.

The presenters spoke about their library having tons of old catalog cards just sitting around, taking up space. They repurposed the cards by having patrons draw and paint on them. If memory serves, hundreds (or maybe thousands) of beautified cards were later exhibited at the library. I loved this idea. Loved it. But my library did not have old catalog cards. So I stashed the idea in the back of my mind—the place where all fabulous conference ideas live—until I could make it work.

Along came an application for the EJK Mini-Grant. Every year, the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation offers up to seventy mini-grants, up to \$500 each, which fund a variety of creative, collaborative projects. Materials purchased with grant money may only be used for carrying out the project and are not intended for extended use. For example, the money should be used for consumables like art supplies, not the easels that will be used in your library's art programs for the next ten years. Additionally, the program should not receive extra funding from your library, school, or other outside sources.

From the long-since-stashed conference idea to the mini-grant application, the We Are Kenosha project was born.

The Lake Michigan shoreline city of Kenosha is situated in the southeastern-most part of Wisconsin, directly between Milwaukee and Chicago. Though the city has a population of



One patron's view of what their city means to them.

just under 100,000, the Kenosha Public Library (KPL) boasts four branches and a bookmobile. In 2018, Youth and Family Services staff held 1,348 programs with a total attendance of 56,807. Clearly, we are a busy bunch of bibliophiles.

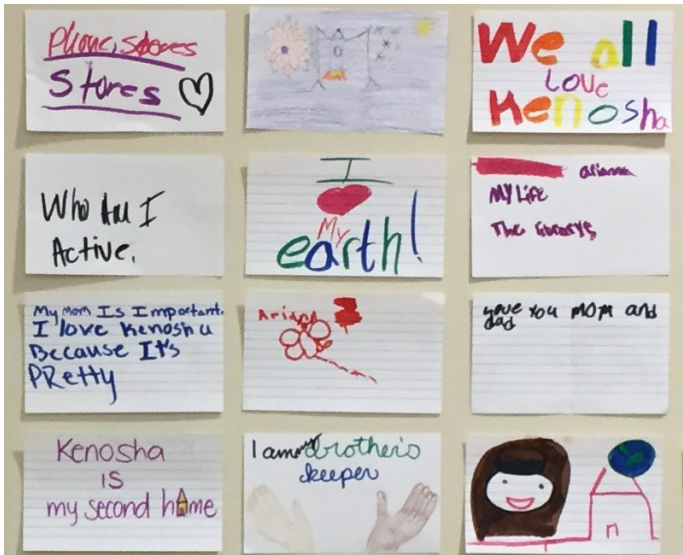
Despite the library's popularity, only 50 percent of Kenosha's residents hold a library card. As a public library, we are able to learn about what our existing patrons want and need from the materials they request, the programs they attend, and the services they use.

But what about the other half of our residents who may not come to our libraries or do not have a library card? How do we learn who they are and what they value? In an effort to expand our collective bubble, the We Are Kenosha project aimed to give residents an opportunity to meet their neighbors through visual art and self-expression.

The project itself was simple. We distributed 3" x 5" index cards, markers, multicultural crayons, colored pencils, and pencil sharpeners in plastic shoebox-sized containers to partner sites throughout the community. Each site also



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A sampling of what residents said they love about Kenosha.

received a collection box (donated by Uline) and instructional sign. The sign read:

Participate in the Kenosha Public Library's community-wide art project! Simply draw or write a response to one of the following questions and drop it in the box below:

- Who are you?
- What is important to you?
- What do you love about Kenosha?
- Draw a self-portrait. Write an ode to Kenosha's lakefront. You're only limited by your imagination!

Invitations to host a box were extended to twenty-seven sites, but only sixteen boxes ended up out in the community. Sites included colleges, religious organizations, school district offices, a senior center, a county detention center, and more. A box was also placed at each library branch and on the bookmobile. Host sites were welcome to place the box wherever they felt it would engage the most people. They could move it around or take it on the road to special events. All boxes remained at the sites for approximately two-and-a-half months.

Afterward, the boxes were collected and response cards were digitized. The scanned images went into a photo album on KPL's Facebook page. This was so that anybody, anywhere in the world, could view the results of this art project. Response cards were also displayed as a mural in the lobby of the Southwest Library, which gets approximately thirty thousand visitors per month. Included in the mural were signs explaining the We Are Kenosha project. The mural remained on display for several months. All remaining index cards, art supplies, and plastic storage boxes were given to after-school care sites in the community.

I had large-scale hopes for this project. This is evidenced by my purchase of 28,800 index cards. Ultimately, we received



250 responses—a much lower rate of participation than desired and anticipated.

Though I believed that a passive, informal approach to this project would work best for encouraging those who say they're "not good at art" to participate, the opposite was true. The greatest number of responses came from the box that sat on the children's reference desk at our largest branch—probably because we were always there to verbally encourage participation.

I realized that it is easy to overlook a passive activity in a non-library space. Such activities rarely exist in businesses and non-library community organizations. Perhaps those who saw the boxes were too busy to participate, didn't think it was "for them," simply did not see it, or just didn't want to participate. It seems that without active encouragement, the activity garnered little participation.

That sounds like the project failed, doesn't it? On the contrary! We Are Kenosha was a success in many ways.

For starters, more than two hundred people participated. It might not be the 28,800 people I imagined, but it was still a significant number. The responses represented diverse ages, interests, political and religious beliefs, ethnicities, languages spoken, difficulties, and life circumstances. The responses reflected a common love for the natural beauty of Kenosha's beaches and Lake Michigan.

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There was also appreciation shown for families, as well as the friendly people, good schools, and excellent community services in Kenosha. The overarching theme of the responses was one of love, peace, and positivity. It was heartening to see close-knit commonalities among respondents who were so different. Through this project, we heard from and learned about citizens that we do not typically reach, such as residents at the Kenosha County Detention Center. The We Are Kenosha project allowed our citizens to share beautiful and personally meaningful artwork, thoughts, and beliefs with others across the city, state, and country. Additionally, the library connected with sixteen community organizations with whom we will continue to partner in the future.

In the end, the response was small, but the impact was large. Libraries have the extraordinary power to bring together people of all backgrounds. So search through the conference or continuing-education storage closet in the back of your brain.

Which idea can you bring out into the light that might build a new bridge to people in your community? &

*To learn more about Ezra Jack Keats Mini-Grants, visit [www.ezra-jack-keats.org/h/about-mini-grants](http://www.ezra-jack-keats.org/h/about-mini-grants).*