

Excellent Experiences in Ridgefield Library

by Michael Jennings

*This method of building community
in Ridgefield, Washington
has global significance.*

Ridgefield Library manager Sean McGill and the library staff have created a strong feeling of community in the Ridgefield Library. The library is much more than a place to find books. Last year, in 2016, there were more than 400 Ridgefield Library events. That is not a mistake; there were more than 400 Ridgefield Library events in one year. Everyone is welcome at any of those events.

One reason the Ridgefield Library is so successful is that it is okay to talk in the library. That encourages people to interact.

If people around me are engaging in happy conversation, I find that I am more efficient. To me, conversation is helpful, not distracting.

Anne-Laure, one of the Ridgefield Library staff, told me that Sean is always friendly and caring. She said that helps everyone in the library feel relaxed, including the staff.

The Ridgefield Library culture supports the Ridgefield City culture of creating community. Mayor Ron Onslow said, "Ridgefield is all about family. We are family." (I wrote that on a note card immediately after he said it.) For example, on February 7, 2017, Mayor Onslow gave a "State of the City" presentation in which he praised excellent contributions from city staff and members of the community. Often other leaders talk only about themselves. Those two areas of leadership strengthen each other.

A little girl had a loving appreciation for a book.

One day I was in Ridgefield Library and I saw a little girl with a wide, tall, thin children's book. She was embracing it with both arms as she walked out the door with her mother. She had an amazingly happy look on her face. Her expression showed that she felt she had found a huge, wonderful contribution to her life.

She was perhaps two years old and already understood the importance that a book can have. Her mother had taught her a way of finding interesting ideas and experiences.

Books encourage children to discover what they like. Early experiences like that are a strong foundation for a successful life.

Children are more comfortable and open to new experiences when adults are comfortable. Because the Ridgefield Library is relaxed and friendly and a good place for socializing, children are more likely to learn.

Stitchery group

Stitchery is any work done with a needle and thread, I was told.

A few months ago the stitchery group had an event in the community room next to the library. I'm guessing that, if a stitchery group event was held somewhere else, I might not feel comfortable joining the group merely to watch. Of course, most likely I wouldn't even know that the event was occurring. Because the stitchery event was a library event it was understood that anyone was welcome and could ask questions. I enjoyed talking with women in the group. I enjoyed seeing what they were doing.

The experience was more intense for me because beginning in 1998 my wife, Adriana, had been employed for 3 1/2 years by a charity group to teach classes in commercial sewing to people who could then start their own small businesses. There was more depth of conversation because I was with Adriana.

Spanish teacher

One day, several months ago, some women were sitting at a table in the library. One of the women was teaching the others Spanish.

I have taught English in three countries. I have enough experience with teaching language to understand that Christina, who calls herself a "facilitator", is excellent at what she does. I watched only for a short time, but it was a pleasant experience.

Playing the Chinese game Mahjong

Another time some women were sitting at a table in the library playing the Chinese game Mahjong. I asked one of the women if Mahjong was as complicated as chess. She said no, she wouldn't like to play a game that was that complicated.

I'm not planning on playing Mahjong myself, but I enjoyed seeing what they were doing. I felt I knew a tiny bit more about the people around me because I'd seen that.

Librarians know a lot.

One thing I've experienced in other libraries, also, is how much librarians know. I was in the Ridgefield Library and one of the librarians, Caroline, asked me what I was doing. I don't

remember the subject but I was researching something obscure and unusual. Caroline had an answer for me immediately. I was surprised and amazed.

Another time I had read an article about local geology and wanted more information. I did an internet search at home and didn't find anything. Caroline provided an immediate answer.

Learning other languages, “speaking like a pirate”

Another time I was standing in the Ridgefield Library looking at a book and Lois, one of the librarians, was helping a young teenager who had asked about books for learning languages. She showed him the books that were available. She said that there was even a book about how to learn how to speak like a pirate. And then she demonstrated speaking like a pirate. That made me laugh.

It seemed to me that what Lois said was important beyond just showing the books. In everything she said, Lois encouraged the young man she was helping to feel comfortable about exploring the possibilities of learning languages. I think most people wouldn't guess about the range of possibilities.

A boy enjoys being 3 years old.

One afternoon after arriving from the post office across the street I walked inside the library near the window seats. A mother and her son were sitting together. The mother said, “He was watching you cross the street.”

I always treat children like equals. I told the boy my name and asked him his name. I told him my age and asked how old he is. He said 3.

I asked him, “How do you like being 3 years old?” Very enthusiastically, he said, “I like it a LOT!” His mother laughed.

I saw the expression on his face. Everything in his face indicated he was having a very good time being 3 years old. Partly, I suppose, he likes being 3 even more than being 2. But also, his enthusiasm indicated his mother is a *very* good mother.

That interaction in the library between mother and son was another example of children being very comfortable in the library.

One of the more than 400 library events of 2016: The *Friends of the Library* Golden Elephant Sale

I told Adriana, “I'm not buying a Golden Elephant, they probably eat too much.” But they weren't

selling elephants. Everything sold was donated.

That December 3, 2016 Ridgefield *Friends of the Library* event made \$1,100 toward building a larger library; 1,690 people visited the sale.

Part of the attraction was meeting and talking with people from the community. I talked with an interesting woman. I hope we see her again.

**Another Ridgefield
Friends of the Library event:
A used book sale.**

A used book sale took in \$4,087.91. All the used books were donated.

One of the reasons that the Ridgefield Library receives such intense and successful support from volunteers in the *Friends of the Ridgefield Library* is that there is a general feeling of enthusiasm in Ridgefield about the library. The money will go to building a new, larger library.

**A 3-year-old played
with a library computer.**

Recently I saw a father had brought two children. He was looking at a book with one of them. The other one, a boy who I guess was about three years old, was using one of the library computers to play what seemed to be a children's game. The little boy was obviously very intensely interested in interacting with the computer. Teaching oneself to interact with computers is one area of developing a good foundation for becoming an adult.

**A little girl hugged a snake
at *Steve's Creature Feature*.**

Children and adults learned about reptiles at the *Steve's Creature Feature* event in the Community Room next to the library. Everyone had a chance to be friendly with a very large snake and other reptiles. It was mentioned that parents should teach their small children that it is not always appropriate to be affectionate with a snake. (stevescreaturefeature.com)

**A father said it is almost as though
his children are "a different species".**

A man and his son walked to the library checkout desk. The father was carrying a lot of children's books. His very young daughter, who was maybe 2 years old, walked to the checkout computer, stood on a stool so she would be high enough to reach the computer screen, and began the checkout process, even though she didn't have any books.

I remarked to the father that his daughter seemed very interested in computers. He said both of his children use computers at home. He said his children are so different from what he knew as a child that it is “almost as though they are a different species”.

We met an interesting French woman.

One day when Adriana and I visited the library, we met a woman who was visiting from France. We got into a conversation that lasted 1 1/2 hours.

I very much appreciate some elements of the French culture. My French friends have been excellent at having long, satisfying conversations. However, in all cultures I've experienced, I've discovered some negative elements. The French, in my experience, usually feel a lot of cultural pressure. They are trained to think and act according to the demands of their culture when they are small children. That training is not obvious to an outsider, and creates a distance between the French and those who don't know what the French culture demands.

The French woman lives in the south of France, near the border with Italy. They sometimes go shopping in Italy. It seems that the people there have chosen the best qualities of both the French and Italian cultures. It was even more enjoyable to have long conversations with the French woman in Ridgefield Library than with most French people I've met because, like Italians, she is more openly expressive. It's easier to know what she is thinking and feeling.

That was another advantage of being able to talk in the library.

A community leader helped me understand plans to reduce local traffic problems.

I was lucky that I happened to meet a community leader in the library, the president of a county citizens group. I had met her before at a garage sale. I had been following the news stories about traffic problems between Clark County and the city of Portland. I asked her some questions and got a clearer understanding.

A small girl taught herself about mechanical things.

One day I happened to walk past the children's play area in the library. It's a small area that is inviting to children. There are many children's books and toys. I saw a very little girl playing with a toy cement mixer truck. I'm guessing that she was about 22 months old, not yet 2. She was intensely interested in what she was doing. It was clear by the way she moved her hands that she understood all the possible mechanical movements of the toy truck.

I realized that I was seeing something wonderful. Too often, little girls and little boys are raised

to be different. Instead of being raised to be people, they are raised to have cultural limits. This little girl was teaching herself to be interested in, and comfortable with, mechanical devices. It was beautiful to see her so happy playing with the truck.

One of the reasons that I immediately knew of the importance of what I was seeing was that I have had experiences with women friends who were raised to be culturally limited.

A long time ago, a woman and I were living together and trying to decide if it would be reasonable for us to marry. One day when I realized that I should change the oil in my pickup truck, it came into my mind that I hadn't heard her talk about changing the oil in her car. I asked her about that and realized that she didn't know that car engines needed regular oil changes. Somehow she had been raised in a manner that isolated her from the mechanical world.

The little girl in the Ridgefield Library reminded me of another woman. Adriana and I know a woman from South Korea. She had been a business executive in Korea, eventually married a man who lives in Portland, and moved to Portland. When she was young she was part of a wealthy family. She had always been driven everywhere. When she moved to Portland, she wanted to learn how to drive. Her husband told us about some of the difficulties she had. Deciding where to park and parking a car were big challenges for her. In her entire life, she had never taught herself to be comfortable with anything mechanical.

When I saw the little girl playing so happily and intensely with a toy cement mixer truck, I thought what I was seeing was beautiful.

I don't know anything about the family of that little girl. However, unfortunately, in our culture it is often considered that little girls should be cute and little boys should go out and play. It is easy to guess that no one in the family would think to give her a truck as a toy. So, it seemed a possible that the little girl was having an experience in the library that she might not have been able to have somewhere else in her life.

Because she was fascinated with the workings of a little toy truck, she was giving herself fundamental understanding of how mechanical things work.

Avery Baker, when he was 10 years old, showed that a theory of the human brain is not correct.

I met Avery Baker in the library. He was then 10 years old. He was there to play role-playing games. I immediately liked Avery because he felt completely free to have lots of ideas.

I told Avery that, rather than play the extremely complicated role-playing games, he could teach himself to be a computer programmer. I said that, since role-playing games are so complicated, becoming a computer programmer would be easier.

Avery gave a very detailed reply. He answered that the human brain at 10 years old is not ready

for such complex tasks. He went into considerable detail about each stage of a theory of the development of the brain, saying that development continues until the early 20s.

I told Avery that, if he wanted to convince me that he is not smart, he shouldn't have used a highly intellectual argument. He laughed.

There was a lot of non-verbal communication in Avery's response. He apparently was just testing the ideas about the development of the brain; he didn't know if he should believe them or not. He didn't feel any pressure from me to change his normal activities; he realized I was just offering an idea.

Later I guessed that Avery must have read about that theory somewhere. I found this article at the National Institute of Mental Health web site: [The Teen Brain: Still Under Construction](#). I also found this article, [At What Age Is The Brain Fully Developed?](#), on the Mental Health Daily web site.

Not only did Avery not convince me, his response invalidated that theory. Avery finds it easy and fascinating to think about complicated issues. I'm amazed that a ten-year-old could do that so well. Avery showed that, in some cases, at least, a ten-year-old brain can easily comprehend complexities that were in the past assumed to be appropriate only for adults.

I met Avery's mother. She told me that once he woke her at 3:30 in the morning to tell her about some idea that he thought was interesting. That made me laugh. I asked Avery about that. He said he had been reading about a fungus that affects ants and takes control over their bodies. I asked Avery why he woke his mother. He said, "*I had to tell somebody.*" I forgot to ask him why he was reading at 3:30 in the morning.

Months later I saw Avery's mother in the library having an intense conversation with another woman. I didn't want to interrupt. I quickly asked her, "Where's the scientific theorist?" She said, "He's at home."

Both Avery and his mother gave me permission to tell these stories. Avery is now 12 years old.

Recently I saw Avery in the library and asked him, "*What is today's scientific theory?*" I thought saying that was probably just a way to joke with him. But immediately Avery said that a university is researching using urine collected in bathrooms to make fertilizer. When I arrived at home I put that into an internet search. I found this article from 4 days earlier: [Toilet at University of Michigan helps convert urine to fertilizer](#). (Jan. 24, 2017)

It has been known for a long time that urine can be used to make excellent fertilizer. The problem has been how to collect the urine.

Stephanie did community service.

Stephanie, a high-school senior, told me that to graduate it is required to do 20 hours of

community service. She was helping in the library. She said she likes doing community service. She said she sometimes does the community service with friends, and that brings them closer.

Stephanie is enthusiastic about being a chef. She said she has liked cooking since she was a small child. She and a friend have been planning for 4 years to open a restaurant after they graduate from culinary school.

Stephanie is one of the players of role-playing games in the library.

Role-playing games at the Ridgefield Library

This story about my experiences with role-playing games at the Ridgefield Library should not give the impression that I think I know very much about the games. I don't.

Some initial reactions After we had lived in Ridgefield for a few months, Sean invited me to sit with him and some teenagers and pre-teens as they played role-playing games. The first thing I realized was that the games they were playing were very complicated. Adriana and I continued to be very busy arranging everything in our new house. I didn't think that I could get involved with anything else that was complicated.

One initial reaction I had is that I don't like the casual acceptance of violence that I see in role-playing games. A long time ago I wrote an op-ed article against the casual acceptance of violence that was printed in the Oregonian newspaper.

Another initial reaction I have about people playing games is that there's no time to play games. It seems to me that everyone needs to learn every day about how the world works. There is very little time for fantasy. Of course I know that there are many people who disagree with that.

So, my initial reactions about the role-playing games in the library were negative. I could see some positive effects. I also knew that I didn't clearly understand what was happening.

The "Sean Effect" I'm interested in everything about Ridgefield. I learned something about the history of when Sean first began to manage the Ridgefield Library several years ago.

The Ridgefield Chief of Police back then, Carrie Greene, noticed that soon after Sean McGill became the manager, the amount of vandalism in the nearby Skate Park was reduced to near zero. Apparently because Sean helped give some teenagers a better feeling of community by helping with their interest in role-playing games, the vandal or vandals no longer felt they needed the hidden protests of vandalism.

I talked with Chief Greene about that before she retired. She said that, being strictly logical, it was important to realize that there may have been another factor that influenced the satisfaction of young students. About the same time that Sean became the manager of the Ridgefield Library, there began to be better management in the local schools.

However, back then, when Sean first managed the library, Chief of Police Greene called the reduction of vandalism the “Sean Effect”.

I see positive effects. I found the games extremely complicated and full of detail I wouldn't have imagined.

Later, as I watched the games in the library, or in the room next to the library, I began to see positive effects. The teenagers and pre-teens who play learn to feel very comfortable having their own ideas, even extreme ideas. That felt good to me, although at the time it seemed unusual.

Recently a teenager named Daniel, who is 14, and two teenage women were in the library. Daniel was expressing himself in the way that I had seen was common in role-playing games. Daniel was talking about a “Nuclear Apocalypse” that he was imagining would happen 20 years from now. He was talking in an excited way about how, after a Nuclear Apocalypse, he would be the leader of the entire world, and what he planned to do.

I thought what Daniel was saying was funny. He was acting very sure of himself. I stood by the table and listened to him because I thought it was amusing. Then I noticed that a woman, who I later learned is 21, was looking at Daniel directly and giving him a very happy smile. When I looked in her face more closely, I noticed there was a look of seriousness and understanding in her face. She wasn't smiling because he was acting crazy. Instead, there was some kind of deep appreciation at what he was saying. I continued looking into her face as she looked at him and gave him what seemed like very intelligent smiles. That moved me to try to understand her reactions better. She seemed to have an understanding that something important was happening.

After watching for a while and thinking about it later, I realized the depth of importance in what Daniel was saying: Daniel was criticizing adult violence.

Recently there has been in the world a huge increase in events that lead to violence. For example, the North Korean government is building missiles that can travel farther than their previous missiles. Vladimir Putin in Russia is also guiding the building of more weapons. The Chinese government is building new nuclear weapons. The U.S. military plans to spend \$1 Trillion upgrading U.S. nuclear weapons, according to a [March 21, 2016 BillMoyers.com article](#).

The founder and president of the [Eurasia Group](#), Ian Bremmer, was interviewed in the [January 4, 2016 episode](#) of the *Charlie Rose* show. Mr. Bremmer talked about his organization's overall view of what's happening in the world. He said, “... I have run this firm for 18 years now. I've never seen a geopolitical environment that has concerned me this much.” (01:52)

I think what Ian Bremmer said is correct. However, he wasn't sufficiently intense about the very destructive direction that the world is going.

But Daniel, in the Ridgfield Library, 14 years old, was showing no weak limits in his expression about the craziness of a new nuclear age.

So, one effect of playing role-playing games in the Ridgfield Library is that it is an outlet that

helps younger people feel comfortable expressing themselves in wide-ranging ways, and expressing criticisms of the adult world. That expression is an avenue for healthy personal growth.

I still think that people need to concentrate on learning how the world works. I still think that any appearance of casual acceptance of violence is not healthy.

But now I see more clearly that younger people need freedom to express themselves about the world they see around themselves. In school, teachers often dominate. Students may not be encouraged to think freely and have their own ideas.

I realize that my ideas about role-playing games are still developing.

Later I talked with Daniel about what he said. He gave me permission to use his name. He took an earlier copy of this article home to show his parents.

There is an effect of learning about these things that feels warm in my heart. If I didn't have the opportunity to watch them playing role-playing games, I would have known less about the community around me. I would have no other way of experiencing younger people playing those games. Once again, the Ridgfield Library has helped me understand a bit more about the community in which I live.

If I had seen some younger people playing role-playing games somewhere else, I think I would not have been invited to observe what they were doing. Because the events happen in the library, everyone is invited to interact.

These are just my experiences.

I've talked with people I've met in the library who have had other kinds of experiences I haven't encountered. For example, I've never seen a *Read to a Dog* event. A local newspaper wrote a story about the event, [Yellow lab, Limon, a great listener for youngsters](#). (Dec. 27, 2016) Some children like reading to a dog because they know they won't be criticized if they make a mistake. Sean's children Cora and Emerson posed for one of the newspaper's photographs.

The U.S. has the best library system in the world

In the early 1900s, steel industry leader Andrew Carnegie gave his money to start 1,795 libraries. That started a cultural phenomenon. It became understood in the U.S. that every community should have a library.

Libraries are one of the reasons the U.S. experienced decades of prosperity.

We have had better leaders partly because those who think they might like to be leaders are able to educate themselves with easy access to books.

We have had social progress partly because those who want improvements can find information about others who feel the same way.

We have had scientific progress partly because those who want to think like scientists can teach themselves scientific methods by reading about famous scientists.

See Wikipedia: [List of Carnegie libraries in the United States](#)

**A French man wanted
to look at a book by
a French-American author.**

A French friend of mine who lives in Rennes, France, read a review of a book in English by a French-American author. He thought he would like to read it. I used worldcat.org and discovered that there is a copy in the largest library in Paris, but that copy can only be read in the library; it is not available to borrow.

In less than a week, I had received the book from a local U.S. library by using [inter-library loan](#). I showed my French friend some pages of the book using Skype internet video.

**A mistake I would
have made**

If I had been alive in the early 1900s, and thought about Carnegie's idea of having libraries as a free place to borrow books, I would have been immediately against the idea. I would have thought that allowing people to borrow books from a library would mean that far fewer books would be sold.

Instead, libraries have encouraged people to read, and because of the enormously increased popularity of books, far more books are sold. The taxes paid to operate free libraries contribute to a socially powerful advertising message that books are good for us and our communities.

**A library can be more than
a place to borrow books.**

Sean McGill's management demonstrates that a library can be more than a place to borrow books. It can be a place to have experiences and events that bring people closer together.

The experiences in this article are examples of what can be accomplished when a library is also a place for social interaction.

With Sean's guidance and the assistance of the three other librarians who work there, the Ridgefield Library creates a healthy foundation for a general feeling of community.

The respect that people have for libraries is a world-class phenomenon. When people go to libraries they show they are interested in the ideas of other people.

Sean McGill has demonstrated that, by making Ridgefield Library a hub for socializing and library events, the respect for other people's ideas can be extended to respect and understanding in many other areas. That helps create a stronger feeling of community.

The Ridgefield Library demonstrates a world-class opportunity for social improvement.

How can healthy leaders move the world away from the influence of unbalanced leaders? How can the world be guided toward a sense of community? Perhaps other libraries can adopt the methods used at the Ridgefield Library.

Building community throughout the world can help us avoid war and other violence.

A strong sense of community tends to discourage expression of violence.

Ian Bremmer's statement is mentioned above: "... I have run this firm for 18 years now. I've never seen a geopolitical environment that has concerned me this much." That seems correct; governments are becoming increasingly unstable and increasingly disconnected from healthy reality. [Russia](#), [China](#), [North Korea](#), [Iran](#), and the [U.S.](#) are developing new weapons. Those are just 5 articles about increasing spending to prepare for killing other people and destroying their property.

People go to libraries because they want to introduce themselves to ideas new to them. People who want to make new connections are exactly the people who can help the world create a new sense of community, and can help the world reconsider and abandon plans for new violence.

How can library leaders manage their libraries to encourage more community feeling?

First, it is useful to know that there are advantages in Ridgefield that may not exist for other libraries.

In Ridgefield, the community center is in the same building as the library.

The Ridgefield City culture makes many of the library events possible. There is a large number of

community members who are leaders or who like to be actively involved. Because there is so much community involvement, the library staff time required is mostly for promotion, Ridgefield Library manager Sean McGill told me.

As was mentioned in the beginning of this article, Ridgefield Mayor Ron Onslow helps create a strong foundation that encourages the library events. A friend of Mayor Onslow who has known him for more than 30 years told me that Mayor Onslow does an amazing number of very helpful things for the community. That's been my personal experience also.

(What the mayor's friend said was more intensely positive than that, but the friend and Adriana and I had met accidentally in a parking lot, we were standing in the dark, and it was raining a little, so I didn't write his exact words on a note card.)

The first duty of managers is to take care of themselves.

An important concern: Encouraging social interaction and library events makes managing a library more complex. How do managers of libraries that encourage social interaction take care of themselves? What methods can librarians use to help strengthen community feeling that are at the same time personally growthful and rewarding for the librarians themselves?

How can library managers and staff encourage social interaction and, at the same time, immediately recognize some interactions that need to be discouraged?

I'm still learning.

When something wonderful happens, when there is some social improvement that makes a positive difference in the quality of society, is often difficult to understand how that is being achieved. It has taken me more than 18 months to understand better the especially friendly culture of the Ridgefield Library. I don't think I completely understand even now. There are likely to be details that are still beyond my comprehension.

Have suggestions?

See the next page.

Michael Jennings

Do you have suggestions for improving this article?

This version of my article above is available for limited distribution. If you would like to help, here are some challenges:

A big challenge with any communication: What will arrive in the minds of other people? What will people who don't know the Ridgefield Library think and feel? Often small changes in the way things are written make big differences in the way they are received.

1. How can we improve the expression of the ideas in the article? Even tiny improvements are very much appreciated.
2. Are the stories in the best order?
3. Are there more details that should be included?
4. Are there ideas in the article that aren't properly understood?
5. How is the Ridgefield Library different from other FVRL libraries? How is Ridgefield Library different from other libraries outside the Fort Vancouver Regional Library District?
6. Can readers accept how wonderful Ridgefield Library is? That can be a problem.

For example, I met a woman from Sri Lanka, the huge island south of India, who was an intern at the Portland Airport international arrivals desk. She and I got into a long conversation while Adriana and I were waiting for someone to arrive from Europe. She was working as official Portland airport staff member and giving everyone excellent explanations of airport policy.

I told her how amazing she is. She disagreed! After several attempts over more than a year, I wasn't able to convince her.

She finished studying English and went back to her country. Eventually she got a job helping with international shipping. Very quickly she was promoted to senior supervisor.

She wrote me an email about that. I said in response, "Finally the world is beginning to agree with me." She sent a very happy reply.

Recently I sent her a copy of an earlier version of this article. She answered: "I am surprised and happy to see my story with you at the end of this article. Thank you so much."

Michael

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