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The Magic Library Card!

I speak from the perspective of a library Board Director/Trustee: for Murrysville Community Library since 2003 (Secretary presently); Westmoreland Library Network™ since 2004 (President presently); and Murrysville Community Library Foundation since 2008. But, here I write mainly from a WLN perspective.

So I say: Magic! That is what your Murrysville Community Library (MCL) card is. Magic. Direct access to a collection of nearly one million print books, DVDs, and other items (e-books excepted), from an MCL that can physically only hold about 62,000 items. It is a story of technological change and collaboration that gets us from 62,000 to nearly a million, and the magic of that card.



The only library name on the card is that of The Westmoreland Library Network (WLN). It promises “The World Within Your Reach.” Truly a long reach: all of Westmoreland County, and even the entire state and other states.

The WLN is a collaboration of 25 semi-autonomous public libraries in Westmoreland County. It is one of 29 Library Districts in Pennsylvania, and it functions under the Office of Commonwealth Libraries (OCL) within the PA Department of Education (DOE).

All 450 or so public libraries in our state serve this way, within the DOE, just as public schools do. Public school educators are “formal” educators; librarians are “informal” educators.” All are educators, each profession in its own way, working within its own professional construct. The DOE’s Office of Commonwealth Libraries has its own Deputy Secretary/Commissioner for Libraries. He is Glenn Miller, also known as PA’s State Librarian.

It was clear to Murrysville Community Library leadership in 2007, and the Board of Directors of what is today the WLN, that a real collaboration was needed in one very important regard, namely the on-line sharing of collection. The libraries needed to be linked in terms of collection as though they were one big Carnegie Library. Across a very large county and the complexity imposed by autonomy-minded libraries.

At the time, MCL was limping along with an out-of-date Athena card catalogue of only its 62,000 items, and it could not by itself afford the capital expense of a simple one-for-one replacement of the catalogue system. At best, that would be standing still anyway. For access to out-of-home collection books, librarians at that time had to make telephone calls to other libraries.

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Driven by its own dire need to upgrade out of Athena, MCL's excellent Library Director of the time, Denise Sticha (who was also by then WLN District Administrator), along with a forward-looking MCL Board of Trustees, and WLN Directors, began the process of overcoming the autonomy-mindset, to build what has become the modern WLN; the new name WLN itself was invented in this time. That transition in mindset continues even today.

The new collaboration was started successfully with a focus on this one big project. Big, formative projects, or even crises, such as the one that we are in now, are often the basis for such major change.

The WLN is powered by a Polaris Integrated Library System (<https://www.iii.com/products/polaris-ils/>) or ILS, which serves all patrons in Westmoreland County as a 24/7, shared, on-line service for placing book holds. And much, much more, including administrative functions, to be discussed at another time. It is sufficient to say at this point that the ILS is the unseen, on-line system that serves you the patron, and gives you access to those nearly one million items, without telephone calls; they come to you by van from any one of the 25 collaborating WLN libraries, without your even being aware of the process that your book hold triggers.

This integration of service (and subsequent upgrades) was made possible by major grants and supplemental funding, none of which any individual library could ever have gotten by itself for a stand-in-place card catalogue system serving only itself. Major supporters include: the R.K. Mellon Foundation, Institute of Museum & Library Services, the Universal Services Schools and Libraries program, and the Office of the Westmoreland County Commissioners. To them and others, our sincerest thanks.

The magic WLN library card is the visible outcome of what we all have done to transform library service, in just this one important way, among others. It is the symbol of the transformation. We want you to appreciate the power in that card, to not take it for granted, to use its power, and to know that it is not really Magic! at all, just a symbol of new technology and collaboration at work, at their best. Thank you for listening to one piece of our library story and stay tuned.

Charles B. Greenberg
WLN Board President