

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on August 17, 2022.

This Board President's View

By Louisa Fordyce, President, Delmont Public Library Board of Trustees

Librarians, library staff, and library board members are sometimes faced with statements such as these: “Everyone has the Internet so we don’t need printed materials anymore.” “No one reads books anymore.” “We don’t need libraries anymore.”

How do we library lovers respond to these statements?

“Everyone has the Internet so we don’t need printed materials anymore.”

Unfortunately, a significant number of Americans don’t have access to digital materials. Although 88.8% of households have a computer (U.S. Census, 2020), just 70% of U. S. households have broadband access (Pew Research). That is a significant gap in the ability of people to access information. And the stats are lower in lower-income and rural areas; 50% of rural America doesn’t have broadband access (Statista).

Some would say that smartphone users still don’t need to use a computer and the Internet, but according to *PC World*, only 56% of American adults have a smartphone. And users can’t do everything with a smartphone that they can do with a computer and Internet access. Some sites won’t load properly on a smartphone, for example, and some sites have limited information available on smartphone apps. For some, reading on a smartphone is difficult and annoying.

In 2021, a year in which we were still feeling the effects of COVID shutdowns, restrictions, and reduced hours of operation, Delmont Public Library’s (DPL) three public-use computers and Wi-Fi connections were accessed frequently. The library recorded 1,041 on-site computer usages and 675 wireless connections. Nearly every time that I enter the library, at least one of the computers is being used, sometimes all three, and I often see at least two patrons with their own laptops accessing the Wi-Fi.

“No one reads books anymore.”

Even though book reading is down a bit in the U.S., adults report reading at least one book per month (Gallup) and spend an average of \$110 per year on book purchases (Statista). But for those of us who are active readers, reading at least one book per week, the cost of those books could be \$500 and higher. Currently, I have saved nearly \$700 this year by borrowing books from the WLN system, and it’s only July.

“We don’t need libraries anymore.”

Libraries are no longer just a repository for the storing and borrowing of books. Libraries are community centers and hubs for organizations that don’t have a physical facility of their own in which to hold meetings. Currently, DPL’s Lendl Community Room is used by Westmoreland Conservancy, Ligonier Retreat Community, Delmont

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on August 17, 2022.

Visionary Committee, Friends of Delmont Library, Socrates Café, Delmont Apple and Arts Committee, Delmont Historical Society, Delmont Pilgrimage Committee, and, of course, the library's Board of Trustees; all utilize the meeting room for their monthly meetings. Additionally, knitting and crafting groups meet at the library, as well as one book-discussion group.

The small town of Delmont has approximately 3,000 residents. In 2021, the library sponsored 136 programs, ranging from solar energy to author presentations to gardening to children's programs and then some. Over 2,700 people of all ages attended these programs, most of which were free. Our library staff and volunteers also deliver programs off site, such as at daycares and farmers' markets; 349 people attended those.

Ultimately, in the words of Ann McCamy, a long-time staffer at DPL and now a volunteer, libraries are the great equalizers. "The public library is one of the very few places that truly doesn't discriminate based on socioeconomic status. No one will be turned away because they have too little money -- or too much. I believe there should be more places where everyone is truly equal, and libraries are an excellent model of that."