

Kalamazoo Public Library

KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

By John N. Berry III

"THERE'S A HISTORIC attitude here. If you want a quality library you have to pay for it. That obligation, first and foremost, belongs to the voters." So says Saul Amdursky, director of the Kalamazoo Public Library (KPL), MI. He was explaining just one of many reasons KPL was chosen as Gale/LJ Library of the Year 2002. The willingness of those voters to tax themselves annually at the rate of more than \$82 per capita for KPL (more than four times

the average for U.S. public libraries) is evidence of their need and strong support for a great library.

The library, in turn, has invested its money to build an enviable array of services; a fine set of up-to-date facilities; a current technology infrastructure to support frequent, timely upgrades; and a strong collection of print and digital materials. KPL is thus able to deliver to those voters what they need and what they want from a modern library. "This community has a love affair with its library," Amdursky exults. "In many respects, we in the library have a love affair with the community."

Kalamazoo stands at the western end of Interstate 94 as it crosses Michigan through a line of industrial cities, beginning with Detroit in the east, through Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, and on to Benton Harbor, on the shores of Lake Michigan, a few miles west. It is home to Western Michigan University

and several small colleges, and, according to Amdursky, this guarantees "a bias" in favor of the library.

Not simply a college town, however, Kalamazoo and the region have suffered from the industrial decline and loss of jobs that curses all of America's rust belt. The economic conditions of the region and of the jurisdiction served by KPL are challenged, according to Amdursky's assessment of KPL's fiscal situation ("Kalamazoo PL's Recipe for Fiscal Success," *LJ* 4/1/01, p. 64-66). Despite that, KPL gets remarkable support from taxpayers.

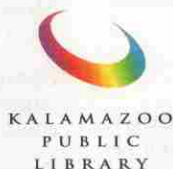
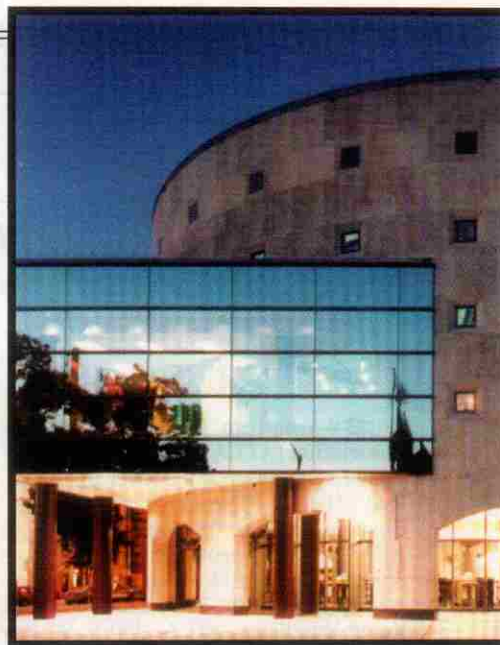
The guarantee of KPL's fiscal success was the vote in 1990 that made KPL a district library. After 117 years as a kind of junior partner to the schools in a school district, KPL became independent, with its own board, and the authority to levy taxes (see Amdursky's "Gaining Independence at the Kalamazoo Public Library," *LJ* 1/93, p. 61). KPL had the good sense to deliver a level of library service that ultimately convinced the voters to go for the maxi-

imum tax support allowed under Michigan law.

The citizenry of the KPL District last voted the maximum millage in 1995, giving KPL \$8.5 million in property taxes, about 90 percent of its budget. Most of the rest comes from "penal fines" from traffic violations, state grants, and other odds and ends. The 119,517 people in the KPL District pay well to support their library. It is a surprising level of support when you consider that poverty (according to the U.S. poverty standard) grips 30-40 percent of the people served by three of KPL's four branches. On the other hand, they get their money's worth from KPL.

The facilities

"Nobody really planned the locations of our branches," says Amdursky. A local leader might donate a piece of property, and a branch would be built. When the KPL building program was developed back in 1995-98, the board and administrators decided not to move or close any branches. Instead, they supported the branches that were there. KPL has four branches, the Central Library, and a bookmobile. While many other public libraries struggle with branches that produce low use but engender fierce protection from neighborhoods, KPL's strategy has been to fund existing sites, both branches and



We've got a pal in Kalamazoo. Clockwise from top left: KPL's Central Library is just a part of the system's appeal; library assistant Lisa Irwin helps a patron in the AV department; Law Librarian Martha Lohrstorfer works with professionals in the law library; the reference area; Director Amdursky (c.) credits an involved staff, including assistant directors (l.-r.) Ann Rohrbaugh and Mary Doud

three reserves. "We want to reach the middle class; we don't want to lose them," says Amdursky. Those investments in tradition are not even half of the KPL story.

Reaching out with technology

"The digital divide is very real here," says Amdursky. In a KPL survey of library users, between 50 percent and 60 percent of those who responded said the library is their only access to computers. The use of computers regularly surpasses KPL circulation. "We try to provide access to enough equipment so that people can get to a computer when they need one. We don't have much queuing," Amdursky states. "We've put a

lot more money into technology because we think we're reaching new users that way. We invest heavily in infrastructure because that makes it easier and cheaper to upgrade when we need to."

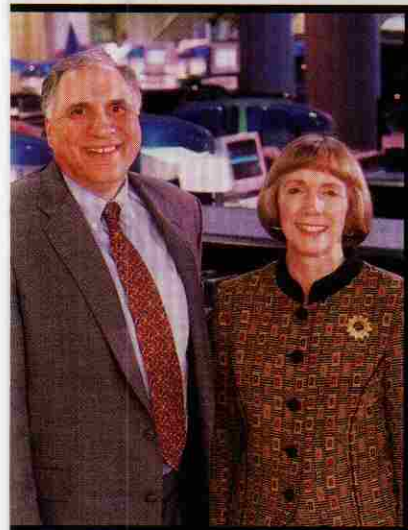
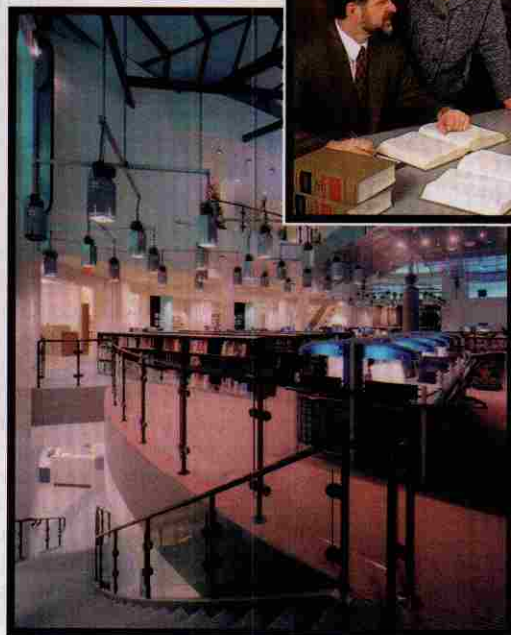
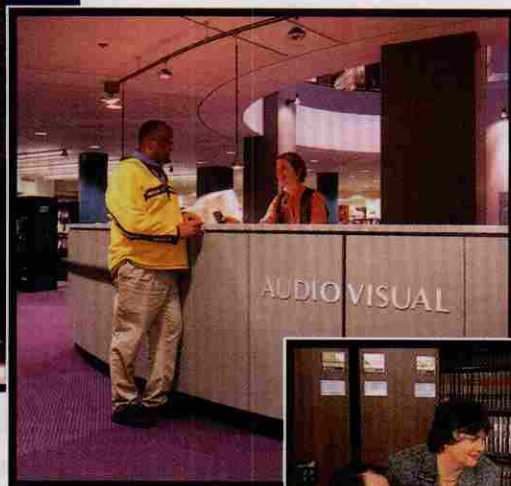
KPL truly reaches out with technology. The library makes some 150 workstations available for Internet access, word processing, and games. The library puts more than \$100,000 annually into electronic databases. A full-time trainer offers classes on information technology to both the public and the library staff. More than half of a \$1,250,000 bond issue initiated in January will be used to improve the library's technology infrastructure and to upgrade its integrated library system via new Citrix software solutions that embrace thin-client technology.

High use, low circulation

KPL has discovered what may be the secret of the public library of the future. KPL facilities, branches, and Central are very heavily used, even though both the number of traditional reference questions and circulation statistics are unchanged or slightly lower than in the past.

Typical is KPL's Alma Powell Branch, located in a neighborhood that is predominantly African American. High-

EXTERIOR LIBRARY PHOTO BY CARR CALDELLA PHOTOGRAPHY; REFERENCE ROOM PHOTO BY FRED GOLDEN; ALL OTHER PHOTOS © 2002 PROSHOOTER.COM LLC



Central. The strategy has paid off in heavy use and in publicity for the library.

"We invested \$1 million in each of two branches, Washington and Eastwood," Amdursky reports. "That was a real help in stabilizing the neighborhoods and starting to revitalize them." The decision not only paid off for the communities involved, but the branches are heavily used as well, though they do not produce high circulation, and are attracting a new constituency of library users. When the new Central building was opened, visits went from about 700,000 to over a million a year. The renovation and high-tech revitalization of the Powell Branch was widely hailed. In a series of editorials, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* lavished praise on KPL's building programs and renovations.

Not only did that commitment to

existing sites strengthen neighborhood loyalties, each site became an economic anchor to its neighborhood. Each community that was struggling to preserve and grow an economic base had its library as a foundation for and useful resource in that work.

Obviously, one key to KPL's success is a building strategy that believes in modernization of existing, familiar sites and buildings. Another is maintaining what some call a "traditional" library. KPL spends nearly 11 percent of its budget on library materials, including popular books. The library buys an additional copy of a new book for every

speed Internet connections on some 14 public access PCs have attracted a new library audience there. Beyond the popular Internet and word processing access, more than two dozen software titles for children, fast printing, and Power Point, Excel, and Publisher applications have made the branch an important, heavily used community asset. "I am not only a proud supporter of the Alma Powell Branch, I am also a user of the library," writes Viola Gaines-McMillon, president of the Metropolitan Kalamazoo Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She uses word processing, networked printers, databases, and even checks e-mail while borrowing books at the branch.

At the Central Library, KPL's Computer Training Lab has attracted thousands of seniors, children, and others to regular training programs. KPL has been willing to experiment with technology in other ways. It may be the first library in the United States to lend digital audiobooks downloaded from a vendor host. This pioneering effort in offering digital AV content is already being copied by libraries nationwide.

Funded by an LSTA grant, an effort was mounted by KPL to use video teleconferencing to link the library with a classroom in the county jail. The idea was to provide inmates with basic literacy training, résumé development, and how to handle job interviews after incarceration. Inmates would also be able to interact with their families. The program hasn't worked well yet, but KPL is confident that it will as soon as software glitches and other problems are solved. A similar program is in the works to give poor families who can't afford to go there a virtual visit to the Cincinnati Zoo.

Kalamazoo Partners in Learning Technology (KPLT) is an enhanced program to provide computer access and training via a coordinator and tutors financed by a federal Department of Education grant. Three of six centers in Kalamazoo are in library branches. "That's because we have long hours and high capacity," says Amdursky. KPL is conducting new sur-



veys to find out what technology training people need.

Filters unnecessary

"We don't filter. It is not a big issue here," says Amdursky. KPL believes in open, visible public use of computers. "We choose not to let people have [utter] privacy," but in his view the problem of Internet porn is decreasing. "In the beginning in the video stores, 15–18 percent of the stock was in porn, accounting for up to 60 percent of the sales. Now successful video stores don't even carry porn." KPL has had no trouble about Internet access this year.

In other words, you must add heavy financing in technology to investment in existing sites to fill out the picture of KPL success. If they loved the building renovations, the local media also applaud the KPL expenditures in technology for the public. As early as 1995, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* called KPL's provision of public access to computers "one of the most meaningful steps the library has taken."

Partners in literacy and law

In addition to its partnership with both the city and the federal government

in the KPLT program, KPL has developed collaborations with others to serve its users. Amdursky is especially proud of the KPL Ready To Read program to promote family literacy. KPL leads a collaboration that includes every pediatrician's office and both local hospitals. Library volunteers read to children and teach book sharing for parents at community sites like health clinics, social agencies, homeless shelters, and Head Start classrooms. Children's librarians conduct "Partners in Reading" workshops for parents.

The hospitals and pediatricians "prescribe" reading aloud for healthy children at all well child visits and give families the books. This year some 4000 newborns received books that were selected by KPL librarians. More than 1000 parents attended Ready To Read workshops. Since the program's inception, nearly 40,000 books have been distributed to about 40,000 parents and children.

Initially funded through the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, Prime-time Family Reading Time targets low-income, low-literacy parents and their children. KPL is one of 14 new sites selected to take the program across the nation. A storyteller, a humanities scholar, and a librarian lead six weekly reading sessions at the library. The program is designed to foster high academic expectations in low-income families and to foster parental involvement in children's education. KPL aims to make the program a permanent part of its regular operating budget.

KPL also runs Mother Goose Sto-

2002 Library of the Year Judges

LJ wishes to thank the following library professionals who volunteered their valuable time to help us select this year's Library of the Year:

Susan Kent, City Librarian, Los Angeles, *LJ*'s 2002 Librarian of the Year

Nancy Kranich, Immediate Past-President, American Library Association

David Warren, Executive Director, Richland County Public Library, SC, *LJ*'s 2001 Library of the Year

Dedria Bryfonski, Executive Vice President, Global Market & Customer/Market Services, Gale

The panel also includes *LJ* staff:

Francine Fialkoff, Editor

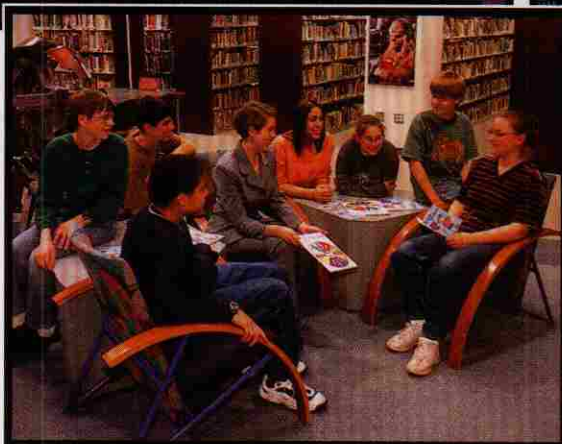
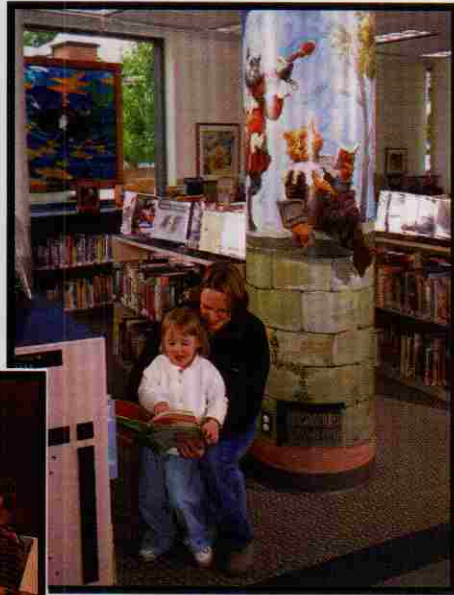
John N. Berry III, Editor-in-Chief

Norman Oder, Senior Editor, News

Brian Kenney, Senior Editor, *netConnect*



A commitment to the future. Clockwise from far left: Library Assistant Stephanie Hampton helps a patron at the popular Alma Powell branch; Ann Sarenius reads to elementary school students in the story room, where the fanciful pillars were painted by children's author/illustrator David Small; and Christine Hann (c.), library associate of teen services, heads up a meeting of KPL's Young Adult Advisory Group



cess is that 1990 decision to create an independent library district. Fiscal stability and strength came from that act.

A second element in KPL's success is flexibility. KPL stayed with tradition in continuing to build strong, popular book collections to keep the attention and devotion of the middle class and older public. KPL funded the branches, reinforcing its citizens' feelings of ownership and loyalty. The library, however, was willing to experiment with services to address real needs of all the people, including many who were not traditional users of the library.

Sharing the vision

The services and collections of KPL are freely accessible and available to users from neighboring libraries, but there is one stipulation. The voters in that

The KPL librarians didn't panic when book circulation and reference questions leveled off. They saw a future role for KPL in technology, and they understood what a magnet that technology would be to attract a whole new constituency of library users. By strengthening the technology infrastructure, they ensured KPL's ability to stay abreast of change and public demands for access. KPL financed research to look at the needs of the people and then set out to meet those needs.

rytimes for babies in cooperation with local hospitals, pediatricians, and guidance centers. The KPL Teens Services department is involved in a special collaboration with the residential Lakeside Treatment and Learning Center to run book discussion programs.

In response to public demand, KPL entered into an agreement with Kalamazoo County to house, develop, and staff a public county law library. The library contains material for lawyers, judges, and laypeople. A series of free legal consultations for those who cannot afford attorneys are offered in collaboration with the county bar association. The Kalamazoo Bar Association started a series of free seminars on recurring legal issues that came up in the consultations.

The library also built an alliance with the local Nonprofit Resource Network to help citizens find agencies that can help them. The library contributes consultations on fundraising and grant writing and money for print and non-print materials to support the network.

neighboring jurisdiction must support their own library with a minimum tax levy of one mill. Nearly all of KPL's adjoining neighbors meet this criterion.

Many look to KPL for other models, too: its willingness to commit to untried technologies or services, its decision to fix existing facilities rather than move or close them, and its much envied position as a freestanding library district. These models are as exportable as reciprocal borrowing and services, and they make KPL a good source of ideas for other libraries.

The elements of success

Amdursky has directed KPL for 15 years. He knows that the first element in KPL's suc-

2002 Library of the Year Special Mention

The abundance of exceptional libraries makes the selection of a winner a difficult task. Several of the libraries submitted for this year's honor feature the service philosophy and dedication to community that signify a Library of the Year. As we can only choose one library, we still would like to acknowledge those we feel are exemplars in the field:

Johnson County Library
Overland Park, KS, Mona Carmack, Librarian

King County Library System
Issaquah, WA, Bill Ptacek, Director

Montclair Free Public Library
Montclair, NJ, Cheryl McCoy, Interim Director

Worthington Public Library
Worthington, OH, Meribah Mansfield, Director

Finally, and possibly most important, the KPL board and administration aggressively pursued the funds necessary to pay for the vision and program they needed. Ultimately, KPL's success proves that even in hard times, in an economically deprived region with high levels of poverty, voters will choose to pay for what they need and want. KPL is one of the best arguments for the case that a good, modern library is an essential asset to people in today's changing communities. ■