

REGIONAL AND RURAL LIBRARIES

Regional public libraries equal family

My name is Felicity Thorne. I've always been an avid reader and loved going to libraries. So when I landed my dream job as an indigenous library trainee in Alice Springs public library I was over the moon. In the beginning of my second week my supervisor forwarded an email inviting someone in our library to write an article about regional and rural libraries for *inCite*. I jumped at the opportunity.

As a person who has lived throughout regional and rural communities all her life, I have an understanding of the community from a consumer's point of view. Now working in the library my understanding has taken a different view. I believe rural and regional libraries are quite different to their sister libraries, like university and medical libraries.

Some of our customers have a laid back view on situations, so we the library must have more flexibility and understanding with our clientele. If we become too technical, we could lose them in confusion. Along with our laid back customers, we also have highly educated clients, as we have several general school libraries, TAFEs, a university, and Desert Knowledge, just to name a few. So in these very different situations the library and the community must come to a clear understanding.

Alice Springs Public Library is classed as a regional library where really it is remote – quite remote. Because of our location, we have a program in place that helps us reach out to those who are more remote than we are – “Country Borrowers”. To become a country borrower the member must be at least 100 kilometres out of Alice Springs and receive their mail via Alice Springs.

Borrowers can tell us their preference, for example, non-fiction, magazines, youth, etc, on the form provided to them. Then we select their books and send them by the mail plane with a reply paid address sticker for their convenience, so it remains absolutely free of charge. Then the process repeats when they send their items back to the library.

The library has received positive feedback from our remote customers, from the book we selected to our support. No matter how far out of town they may be, they are still part of our community.

One of our great accomplishments is that our indigenous customers' numbers have increased greatly. This is partly due to our Akaltje Antheme Collection, which has an array of books about culture, languages of our regions, health, and education which have been donated to the library by local organisations. We also have computers in the area set up with 'Indigi-links', an indigenous-based site with web links, digitised copies of books, and other items including media and art sites and archive and museums related to indigenous affairs.

We also have a program with schools: The Wii program. This program is to encourage school students to stay in school. Students go to school for five days straight, then get a pass signed by their principal. Then they can come in after school and play on the Wii. It has been well received and the teachers are so happy with this program that they are willing to come to the library during the lunch hour with the selected students who have gone to school for a whole week. Teachers coming in with students has been greatly encouraged as the library found that the students were taking their little passes home and accidentally forgetting about them.

Also for children is story time, when the parents or carer of a young child/children can come in with their children and sit down and listen to stories and do some crafts. If there is an eventful week, such as Children's Week or Water Week, the library will try to fit that in to the stories and crafts. In the week before Halloween, the children made a lantern for trick or treating.

I love working in a regional library and I hope to continue for many more years to come. For me, this library and the community as a whole is more interconnected than any of the others have been. We are a family, we are one.

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Young adults find their place at country libraries

Finding MY Place (FMP), an initiative funded by the Department for Education and Training and Local Government authorities across WA, is a fantastic program for young adults offered at various country (and metro) libraries across WA. FMP is intended to 'value add' to opportunities offered at school by using the resources and facilities of the local public library. It offers a career focus and provides opportunities to develop students' skills in a fun, interactive way. It also provides transition support for students going into secondary school, further education, work, or training. FMP involves ten two-hour sessions on a variety of subjects, including Street Art, Hairdressing, Special FX, and Hospitality Skills. The positive changes we've seen in Narrogin as a result of FMP are particularly important for our town at the moment due to some very serious problems with suicide, anti-social behaviour, racism, and bullying among young adults.

FMP fulfils important community outcomes by promoting library use and literacy skills, as well as more specific outcomes geared towards youth potentially 'at risk'. The FMP program encourages young people to see the library as a comfortable and welcoming place, as well as a place for learning, and in doing so aids in

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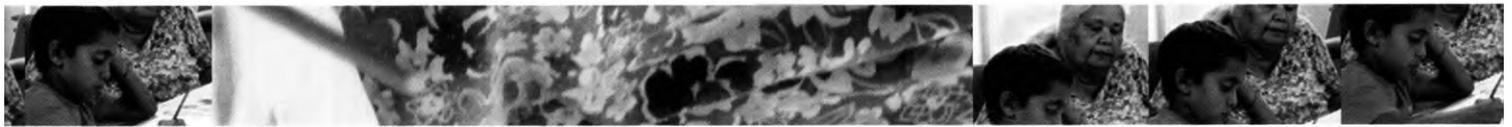


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maintaining and improving literacy levels. Furthermore, holding the FMP sessions at the library encourages young people to become library members and to use the facilities regularly. The overarching outcomes of the program are long term social capital gains, targeting 'at risk' youth to minimise social problems and developing an informed, involved community which has an excellent quality of life.

As a direct result of FMP, public perception of the library's role in the community has changed – people now understand that we don't just stamp books! Press coverage has been good

and the program has helped to consolidate strong relationships with local schools and service organisations. FMP has been a successful part of our campaign to increase the library's budget so that we can offer more youth development programs. It has also helped highlight our focus on enriching the lives of **all** members of the community and making the library a warm, inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone. Most importantly, we have had very positive feedback about the changes in students who attended. Their relationship with other students and school staff who also attended has been enhanced and their attitude and motivation at school has improved.

Changes have also been commented on in terms of the library environment itself; students (and often their families) feel welcome and visit regularly. Quiet is a thing of the past although respect for oneself, others, and property is stressed. Students and library staff share a very positive relationship – all are on first name basis and a mutual respect is apparent.

Involvement by library staff in a town Youth Services Providers Reference Group has grown out of the FMP program, offering excellent opportunities for cross-agency support. A Community Literacy and Numeracy Group which meets at the library has also recently been formed as a result of improved community perception of the library's role in literacy development. Whole community engagement will ensure that outcomes of the program are supported and that complementary programs are implemented. A regular Youth Drumming group has been established at the library based on the success of the Drumbeat sessions within FMP. Finally, representatives from The Pacific Institute visited Narrogin to speak with key stakeholders in youth services across the town about future possibilities for targeting problems in the Town. FMP has been the instigating factor in each of these initiatives.

Essentially, FMP is about building connections and forging positive relationships. The saying is that people will always ask someone they know when they have a question – we have to make sure that person is a librarian, trained and ready to help. FMP is providing a platform for staff to get to know students in the town, and allowing students to develop a feeling of connection and respect towards their library. Country libraries across WA are using the program to help build community capacity and to engage young people with their services. And it is working!

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Are we just lazy? Why aren't libraries fully using online technologies?

Rural libraries are faced with some unique problems. Laziness is typically not one of them. We are motivated community members who go the extra mile to support and facilitate projects that we believe in and programs that will benefit our communities. Typically funds are tight, but energy is high. In our small, isolated communities everyone has their ideals and passions and we work to inspire our communities to contribute to our favourite causes. This is the beauty of our rural communities – unfortunately there are also downfalls: infrastructure is often limited, services are scarce, and telecommunications channels outside of the major rural townships are sometimes simply non-existent. Remote communities that could benefit most from online banking, remote shopping, and forming online networks to exchange ideas through blogs, wikis, and other social networking sites are denied these urban essentials because of poor infrastructure, because our rural librarians have trouble accessing comprehensive training, and because of our slow, cumbersome public PCs.

Geographic remoteness

Remoteness is the question and the answer to the problem of why the Tableland Regional Libraries are moving cautiously in our uptake of virtual services. Would not the remoteness and isolation of many of the Tablelands areas ensure and maximise the take up and delivery of advanced online services?

Theoretically – yes!



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