

## State chief lauds library

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PLAINFIELD — Some libraries offer books, but not much else.

Plainfield Public Library offers an experience.

There's the microfilm archives that showcase local newspaper pages dating back more than 125 years. There's a local artist's atmospheric, brightly colored paintings hanging on exhibit in the dimly lit Anne Louise Davis Room. There's the new children's library, designed to resemble a jungle landscape, complete with a swinging bridge, vines and critters galore. There are rows of computers with Internet access, few of which ever sit unused during daylight hours. And there's the local history department and archives, where columns of movable, towering shelves hold endless volumes of municipal records, photographs and artifacts, some dating all the way back to the 1700s.

It's part of the reason why newly appointed New Jersey State Librarian Mary L. Chute described it as a model for others across the state — in the 21st century, after all, it's not just about books anymore.

"I just want to stay here the whole day," Associate State Librarian Peggy Birdsall Cadigan said Wednesday, joining Chute and others on a tour.

Chute became the state's top librarian in late July following the retirement of Norma Blake.

Plainfield Public Library Director Joe Da Rold, the New Jersey Library Association's Librarian of the Year for 2010, who has held his current post for 18 years, has spent that time helping transform the Park Avenue landmark into a beacon of learning.

It's where struggling Queen City residents flock to search for jobs online or learn English. It's where students from nearby Plainfield High School stream after dismissal to study or find resources for projects. And in the wake of Hurricane Irene last year, thanks to quick thinking on the part of Tina Marie Doody, the library's head of public services, it's where residents without power rushed to recharge their electronics at one of several charging stations.

And all of this has been accomplished in a building that dates back to the 1960s and exhibits many of the funky quirks of that era's architecture.

"It has been repurposed and redesigned in a way that's just lovely," Chute said. "And I just love the children's room."

That \$600,000 project culminated in a grand opening last fall, and it has been a boon to local kids ever since. That's a decent chunk of change for an urban library that has to pinch every penny in an environment of municipal belt-tightening and donation declines.

About a dozen people busied themselves on computers at the library Wednesday morning while several dozen more paced between bookcases or made use of the microfilm scanners. The library was closed for renovations from July 30 until Aug. 20, and the fruits of that labor opened up an entire wall of windows to nearby Library Park and led to the establishment of the Job Assistance Computer Center, a separate room where computer training and job-search skills will be taught during regularly scheduled classes of about 12 to 15 enrollees apiece starting next week.

“We’ve actually hit every department now,” Da Rold said of the renovations that have been continuing on and off for years. “People are just finding themselves places where they feel the most comfortable.”

For the library’s lead archivist, Sarah Hull, that would be the climate-controlled, brightly lit archives room, where a treasure-trove of the city’s most precious historic relics are preserved. Hull led Chute and Cadigan down a tall row of shelves filled with ornate leather-bound record books documenting police and courts activities in the city dating back to the mid-19th century.

“Not all of them are in the best shape,” she noted.

“Still,” Da Rold said, “this is going to be an incredible genealogical resource.”

Chute, who has spent the last decade with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an arm of the federal government in Washington, said she plans to visit at least one library of note in each of New Jersey’s 21 counties during her first year on the job. The former state librarian of Delaware said she also plans to use those visits to get a better handle on what direction in which she’d like to see the state’s 400-plus libraries go.

“There’s a tremendous amount for me to learn,” she said. “But so far, if anything, this has been better than expected I’m able to be in those kinds of (positions) to help shape impact and policy, but still close enough to see the ... differences that library service can make in the lives of people in the community.”