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Inside the library, it's a jungle in here

Dazzling new children's section to open

By Mark Spivey | Staff Writer

Among the many exclamatory reactions to the newly renovated and dramatically redesigned children's section in the Plainfield Public Library, attendees at a recent cocktail reception held to toast the project's completion seemed to agree that City Councilman Cory Storch summed things up best.

"I'd like to be a kid again," Storch was quoted as saying.

In what library director Joe Da Rold called "our gift to the children of Plainfield," the \$500,000 overhaul, described as the first capital project in library history funded primarily by donations, will be unveiled to the public Saturday morning.

Visitors will discover that the relatively run-of-the-mill children's section that once existed is gone, replaced by a jungle paradise striking in its attention to detail. From the vivid fluorescent green paint on overhead piping to cargo netting suspended from parts of the ceiling to colorful oversized stuffed frogs sitting atop bookshelves, the illusion is convincing. Across the room from a rope bridge and huge panels illustrated with bamboo shoots, tribal masks cover the walls — they're from Da Rold's private art collection, he said, but "they're the library's now."

"We wanted to focus on environmental issues and ecology," Da Rold explained of the theme, the development of which dates back about five years. The project was performed via a construction contract and loads of volunteer assistance, he added.

Fermin Martinez of Watchung, a social worker in Plainfield, created an enormous mural illustrating a rainforest landscape while city resident Damon Bopp produced the stenciling on the sign over the front doors. Private donations and grants accounted for about 80 percent of the cost, Da Rold said, while an additional \$100,000 came from the City Council's capital budget.

The room's striking visuals make it easy to forget about its amenities, but the new section also features 10 state-of-the-art computers (seven with filtered Internet connectivity, three with word processors), a new self-checkout station, seating for nearly 100 and an "explorer's tent" for middle schoolers. A panel in the wall mural swings open to allow for puppet shows, while a wide retractable screen can extend over the panel to show movies in high definition.

Da Rold credited Peter Rajcevic, the library's chief technical officer and facilities manager, with overseeing the creation of what the facility is calling "an environment that has burst forth from books of faraway lands" as well as "a haven from the pressures of school and family, where individuals, friends, families, and classes can visit for quiet excitement and learning."

"Insane. But a good insane," Rajcevic said when asked what he expects Saturday morning at the library to be like. "It'll be cool."

"We may be challenged with the number of seats we have," library Board of Trustees President Anne Robinson predicted.

The project is being dedicated to late city philanthropist Mary Vic Griswold, whom Da Rold said was the single most generous donor to the project. It's another chapter in what's turning into a long success story for the library under Da Rold, the 2009 Librarian of the Year as named by the New Jersey

Library Association: Robinson recently was honored by that group with its Trustee Recognition Award, while the facility's circulation recently jumped from 80,000 in 2007 to more than 100,000 in 2009 despite state aid cuts and other forms of budget woes.

Additional Facts

ON THE WEB

For more information about the library, go online to www.plainfieldlibrary.info
