The Maine Humanities Council partners with libraries on programming that inspires, educates, and excites.

Imagine you’ve been asked to build a house for your whole family (kids, spouse, parents). You can do everything on your own or find help. Most of us would elect for help; that’s not a bad idea—it’s good to use experts.

Now imagine you’ve been challenged to build “houses of the mind” for your whole family—places where your kids, spouse, and parents will find mental fulfillment that will keep their minds engaged and hungry for more.

Here at the Maine Humanities Council, we consider our programming to be houses for the mind. And what better partner could we have for this than our community experts in minds of all ages: local libraries.

Each year, the MHC partners with over 30 libraries statewide, offering scholar-led reading and discussion programs, foreign policy speaker series, film and discussion groups, and more. We rely on libraries to help us serve audiences across Maine with programming that inspires, educates, and excites.

Our library programming is free both to the public and to libraries. That’s crucial: quality public programs are expensive. The MHC helps libraries diversify what they can offer and, in some cases, serves as a library’s programming arm, as some simply don’t have the financial resources to offer community programming without help.

Your financial help makes this possible. Please join us in building houses for the mind by making a gift with the enclosed envelope or at mainehumanities.org.

This MHC Update issue highlights our library partners and programming. We hope you enjoy what you read!

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For more information about the MHC programs described herein or to subscribe to our online newsletter for monthly updates, go to mainehumanities.org.

Maine’s rural librarians are incredible people. We hear stories every week about how libraries in the least populated parts of the state build collections, community interest, and sometimes a physical structure itself. The MHC relies on the strength and determination of our most rural partners, as well as their imaginations.

It’s not easy to run a rural library, but the way Jeanne Benedict, director of the Henry D. Moore Library and Community Center in Steuben, describes it, it’s certainly a great deal of fun: “I love the personal nature of my job as a library
director in a small town. When patrons come in and ask for a book and I get it for them, their appreciation brings huge satisfaction—especially if you make a child happy by putting a book they requested in their hands. Knowing my patrons well also makes it easier to recommend books or set aside that new book for just the right patron and make their day. I get to enjoy watching my young patrons grow up, going from shy little toddlers to eager, talkative readers who sometimes share their drawings or poems with me. I often say that I have the best patrons, and I love seeing and interacting with them every day. I’d like to think that my efforts have helped to make the Henry D. Moore Library a friendly, welcoming small town library."

The MHC reached out to partner with Jeanne to create a new series for its Let’s Talk About It reading and discussion program. This MHC series, by popular demand of librarians statewide, will focus on Maine mystery novels.

Jeanne enjoys mystery novels, but she knows the genre might not normally inspire discussions beyond, as she puts it, “the basics of the whodunnit.” After extensive research into mysteries by Maine writers, hunting for those kernels that promise good discussion, Jeanne was pleased to find clear Maine flavor. Not only did she find references to “the weather or small towns and small town personalities,” but also “a societal or historic issue, like drug use, teenage homelessness, poaching, or the militia, which I felt could lead to some great discussions even though, or maybe because, they are potentially controversial subjects.”

The new series should be popular at many libraries, as mystery readers are among the most avid patrons of libraries across the state, and Jeanne is confident that this series will appeal to her patrons in Steuben, promising “lively discussion.” And she expects to enjoy the series personally, too.

One of the hardest parts of contributing to the series was Jeanne’s own humility. And she’s quite willing to admit that she doesn’t always have confidence in tasks like this. She also worried about the time it would take. These feelings come hand-in-hand with running a rural library. A lack of time and also money stand in the way of so much. As Jeanne put it, “There are always so many ideas for making the library better and so few chances to act on them.”

But part of what makes Jeanne a great librarian and a wonderful partner for the MHC is her enthusiasm for her work. And thanks in large part to Jeanne, this series will be fantastic.
TO UPLIFT AND TO EMPOWER: Q&A WITH THE SCARBOROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARY

Turn off busy Route 1 in Scarborough, and on a fast-moving side street you’ll find the Scarborough Public Library. The library building emerges past a small cattail-filled pond surrounded by trees, presenting a beautiful and welcoming exterior. This fall, I met Celeste Shinay, Program and Development Manager, and Louise Capizzo, Youth Services Manager, to talk about the MHC’s library programming at this particular site.

The Scarborough Public Library has partnered with the MHC on a great deal of programming, including the Theater of Ideas performance Maine at Work, the Muslim Journeys “Points of View” film series, the reading and discussion program Let’s Talk About It, and, this year, our Civil War community program. I asked Celeste and Louise to share their thoughts about what it’s been like to experience so many MHC programs through a partnership that began in the early 1990s.

Q Can you share a little of your recent history with the MHC? Celeste & Louise: In 2012, [the Library] convened focus groups to help us identify new strategic goals. We were consistently acknowledged as the primary resource for enrichment, information, and public programming in our community. The MHC had a hand in building that reputation — and continues to help us respond to this expressed need in our community.

The MHC has also empowered us to develop original programming through community grants. We used the Let’s Talk About It model to build awareness around a town-wide emergency preparedness program we were involved in. The Resiliency Series: Becoming a Prepared Community included multiple book discussions on topics related to the skills and attitudes needed to build personal resilience.

Q Louise, you have great experience with graphic novels and in working with a teen audience, and you’ve helped the MHC with ongoing development of a graphic novel series. During this partnership, we’ve realized that “teen audiences” isn’t a simple definition of a constituency. Could you share your thoughts about the kinds of things that we both need to consider in working with a teen population of different ages?

A Louise: Most importantly, we need to acknowledge that teens are extremely social people and move in packs. It is almost impossible to get them to attend anything if it might single them out. They are also very busy individuals. They juggle school, extra-curricular activities, work, and find time for hanging with friends. To attract them to any program, the content needs to be relevant to their lives or interests. Being finicky and easily distracted, they...
need to know the person who’s offering the program; they have to know and trust the facilitator.

Usually, my first interaction with any individual, regardless of age, is giving a book recommendation, which can be a very personal act. Librarians know that books can change lives, deepen an understanding, or offer a new perspective on a familiar topic. Every time I make a book recommendation to a teen that they’ve enjoyed, I make a connection with that individual. It is a very important step, having them trust me and be willing to step out of their routine and attend a program to show support.

Q Can you talk about some of the things you’ve learned (and have helped us learn) in the graphic novel series development process?

A Louise: [It’s all about] developing a program that is relevant to their interests; something that is so awesome that they will not hesitate to take time out of their busy schedule to attend. This means working with a core group to get their input and involve them in some way so that they feel some ownership to the program.

Considering where and when an event is held is another important factor. Having the teachers and school librarian involved in promotion is a great way to drum up interest. Another idea is having the program fit into an area of study. And then, even if you’ve drummed up enthusiasm, had lots of teen input and support from the school, you need to be accepting if you only have fewer than 10 attend.

Q So how would any one graphic novel come into play in this programming?

A Louise: To introduce the idea of using art as a way to heal the world, I would use the book The Plain Janes by Cecil Castellucci and Jim Rugg. Jane moves from a big city to suburbia after the events of 9/11. She thinks that her life is over—the small town is super boring—until she meets three other girls named Jane who decide to form a secret art gang and turn the town and high school upside down.

Based on Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, the format fits in nicely with the design of graphic novels. The story itself, and the fine writing, makes this book one teens would find interesting and uplifting.

Q Celeste, you said something really beautiful earlier in this conversation: “Our goal programatically is to uplift.” How do you see that translating into the kinds of Let’s Talk About It series and programming that the Scarborough Public Library has held?

A Celeste: We share a common mission: to inform and empower individuals and communities to affect positive change, regardless of means. Our Library, and all libraries for that matter, offers the opportunity for personal transformation every time someone crosses our threshold. And our services are free. I can’t even begin to quantify that value—and that responsibility. We are a trusted resource, and so we look for relevancy when we consider MHC programs.

For example, when we learned that a regional hospice facility was opening in our community, we applied to host the Let’s Talk About It series, “Making a Difference: How Love and Duty Change Lives.” The book selections addressed important issues we may face in caring for partners, children, and aging parents, and how best to demonstrate our humanity under challenging circumstances. That series led to a wonderful partnership with the hospice organization; we have since offered original programming on end of life issues facilitated by their staff. It may not be an “uplifting” topic, but our efforts nurtured an important relationship and started a conversation on a subject many struggle to address. The MHC program was the catalyst. We empowered people, and that is uplifting.

Q We always think of libraries as the centers of their communities. How do you see your library in that role? And what kinds of challenges have you faced in Scarborough within that role?

A Celeste & Louise: Libraries are the heart of their communities; when we hear about closures, we know the spirit of those communities will suffer. Our library is no longer just a book repository; we support the whole person—from cradle to grave. We offer story times that begin at birth, and we deliver materials to the home-bound. We are a safe afterschool destination for students and a touchstone for seniors who live alone. We offer free access to Internet and public computers to keep people connected—and it’s important to note that many people still do not own their own technology. We cultivate partnerships with town departments, we are present in the schools and supportive of educators and students, we are active in our local Chamber of Commerce and Buy Local organizations, and we are a resource for other non-profit and service organizations.

That said, it is challenging to sustain this level of service. And we have to be consistent and persistent in presenting ourselves as a 21st-century institution that still values tradition. We work hard to balance time-honored library services with ever-changing technology like online catalogs and downloadable audio and ebooks. Communities that can offer these newer delivery systems have a better chance of being perceived as relevant. But we are equally committed to the printed page and to personal
service. That won’t change. We want people to think of us as a lifelong resource.

**Q** What are you each most proud of about your library?

**Louise:** Making the library relevant and inviting for our youth is something that is important to me. They are the future stewards of our library, which is why we created a Teen Advisory Board and an after-school book group. Every time we make a connection or offer programs that give them a voice, we’re preserving the future of libraries. I’m proud to be a part of that.

**Celeste:** I am very proud of the commitment my colleagues have to this library, our patrons, the community, and also to each other. We take great care to build a collection that is responsive to the interests of our users. We make sure that adult and youth reference staff are always available when we are open. We consider sustainability when expanding services or creating program series. We seek out partnerships that will mirror our goals. And we always ask ourselves, “Will this make the library experience better for our patrons?” They drive our work.
Scott Erb, Professor of Political Sciences and Interim Honors Director at the University of Maine at Farmington, prefers to connect, not just lecture, to public audiences. Scott is a popular presenter of the MHC’s World in Your Library foreign policy speaker series, known by librarians and participants for the quality of his talks, the depths of his presentations, and the openness he takes to every conversation. According to his audiences, Scott goes deep, but also makes complex topics easy to understand.

Scott’s World in Your Library talks include “Oil, Islam, and the Arab Spring,” “Still Allies? The U.S. and Europe,” and “Rethinking U.S. Foreign Policy,” and “Children and War—What Can the United States Do?” These are rife with challenging themes, but Scott approaches each with a simple goal: to help audience members learn more about the world around them.

Interested in learning more about World in Your Library or presentations by Scott Erb? Visit mainehumanities.org for our schedule, and contact Nicole at nicole@mainehumanities.org if you’d like to see World in Your Library at your local library.