

TOY LIBRARY SEES BOOM IN BUSINESS

Visits, circulation of facility on the rise

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It's a good thing Lo Ve Fuqua was at a toy library and not a restaurant kitchen, because some of her culinary creations were decidedly not ready for the dinner menu.

Maple syrup and mustard on a cold hot dog. Cheesy water. Boiled chocolate milk.

"Warm chocolate milk?" asked her mother, Conneshia Miller, who by this point had already endured several servings of questionable plastic food. "That might be nasty."

"No, it'll be good," Lo Ve, 4, answered. "I'll just put it in the oven."

The taste test happened this week at the toy library in the Lincoln Branch

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SHAWN DOWD/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lo Ve Fuqua, 4, is all giggles and laughter as she plays with her mother, Conneshia Miller of Rochester, in the Toy Library.

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Ilesha Terry, clerk/technician at the Toy Library, keeps the games fun and exciting as she plays with Christopher Rivera, 12, at the Lincoln Branch Library on Joseph Avenue in Rochester.

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Library

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Library on Joseph Avenue. Since the Rochester Public Library hired an early education specialist to run it earlier this year, the 29-year-old toy collection has seen a huge spike in visits and circulation.

From July to November 2013, 471 children visited the toy library. In the same five-month span in 2014, the number was 2,637, a 460 percent increase.

Sarah Fitts-Romig, who spent 25 years teaching young children — including 12 years in the Rochester School District — took over the toy library in the spring. She sifted through the catalog; removed the old, unappealing toys; and relabeled and reorganized the 4,500 or so items that remained.

She arranged with local day care and summer programming providers to visit once or twice a week; 35 of them took her up on the offer over the course of nine weeks.

Speech and physical therapists have sessions there and home school families come for lessons. Fitts-Romig tries to spend more time on the floor with the children than behind the desk.

“I do more teaching in a week here than I did in a month (at school),” she said. “I can just go with the flow. ... This is one of the handful of places in Rochester really promoting the value of play.”

There are trains, balls and dinosaurs; dolls of all ethnicities; a horse with a Monopoly board built into its side and beads for a mane; Wedgits, which are good for stacking; plastic food, which is what Lo Ve Fuqua was serving up to her mother; and elaborate marble runs, which is what 12-year-old Christopher Rivera found most interesting.

He'd lined the plastic chute up in a straight line and was racing marbles at breakneck speed with Ilesha Terry, a part-time clerk at the library. He was having the most success with “The Tiger,” an orange marble with black stripes.

“The more momentum it has, the faster it gets there,” he explained. “And the faster it goes, the more fun it is.”

The toys on the bottom shelves, where small hands can grab them, are for use in the library itself. The higher shelves have toys that patrons can check out and take home, just like other library materials. There are also backpacks filled with toys, books and educational guides around a single theme, like farming. There was no particular theme to the puppet show 4-year-old Eric Seitzinger was putting on for his mother. It featured a dolphin, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, a nasty spider and a friendly looking wizard whom

Eric for some reason had decided was evil. “Now, let me hear some clapping out there when I get out,” he called from behind the curtain to his audience of two. There was clapping. Minnie emerged with the spider.

“Minnie was walking down the street, and she saw a spider — *Ahhh!*” Eric recounted. The spider ate Minnie. Then the wizard ate the dolphin. That was the end of the show.

The toys are cleaned regularly by the staff and a group of men with developmental disabilities that comes in weekly. Unlike books, which are bought with dedicated funds, the toys in the library are almost entirely donated, and even Fitts-Romig only works 20 hours a week. Donations and volunteers are much appreciated.

The biggest obstacle for growth has been the fact that even regular Lincoln Branch Library patrons don’t always realize the 2,500-square-foot toy library is open in the back. Fitts-Romig is trying to change that with more effective promotion.

Miller brought her daughter for the first time this month, and expects to become a regular customer.

“As many times as I’ve been to this library, I never knew this was back here,” she said as Lo Ve started casting about for dessert ingredients. “We’ve been here for two hours, and I think we’ll be here until they close. I don’t think she’s thinking about going home.”

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'This is one of the handful of places in Rochester really promoting the value of play.'

SARAH FITTS-ROMIG EARLY EDUCATION SPECIALIST



Antasha Wilson of Rochester plays with her niece, Sammiyah Jones, 4, in the Toy Library.

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The always busy Toy Library at the Lincoln Branch Library on Joseph Avenue in Rochester.

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