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South Lee library's allure covers 10 years Countywide day recognizes impact on Estero community

By Christina Cepero
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Cas Obie fell in love with south Lee County eight years ago. It wasn't the warm weather, palm trees, nearby beaches and golf courses that stole his heart.

It was the library.

The South County Regional Library in Estero is celebrating its 10th anniversary Wednesday morning with cupcakes, lemonade, music, tours, comments by Obie — vice president of the Library Friends — and a proclamation presented by Lee County Commissioner John Albion.

Lee County commissioners also declared Wednesday as South County Regional Library Day.

Albion said the library was probably a selling point for some to move to Estero.

"A good library system does improve the attractiveness of what's available for people," he said.

In 1989, county leaders began discussing the need for a regional library in south Lee.

Sally Bissell, a former real estate agent, used the library as a selling point when it was in the planning stages. She later became a reference librarian, joining the staff at South County two months after it opened.

"The headline should read, 'Build it and they will come,'" she suggested.

On the library's birthday each year the staff has held a contest in which they guess the number of people who walk through the door that day. The employee the closest guess wins a giant chocolate bar. Last year's count was 700.

"I guessed 860 for this year. I think I'm low. I have a feeling I'm going to be way off," said Beth Nagengast, branch manager. "I think it's going to be 1,000."

The library has grown with Estero.

In 1996, an average of 3,000 vehicles a day drove on Three Oaks Parkway north of Corkscrew Road. The daily average was 12,900 in 2005. The number of visitors to the library in July 2006 totaled 17,666, nearly double of what it was in July 1997.

"We used to think we were on the edge of the Everglades because when we had to go to lunch we had to go so far away," said Andrea Carter, a reference librarian who started at South County on Aug. 2, 1996.

"We had book discussions and would be lucky if we had five people. Now, depending on the book, we get anywhere from 15 to 30. And we have three times as many (programs) to choose from, too," Carter said.

IF YOU GO

- What: South County Regional Library's 10th anniversary celebration featuring congratulations from civic leaders and officials including new library system director Sheldon Kaye, a performance by flutists and library patrons Bill and Beth Larsen, and the reading of letters from Friends of South County Library president Claire Hauenstein and former branch managers Wendy Alex and Linda Holland
- When: 10 a.m. Wednesday
- Where: 21100 Three Oaks Parkway, just north of Corkscrew Road in Estero
- Information: 390-3200

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Jessica Girlando, a librarian who schedules the adult programs, said she used to average 10 people seven years ago. Now she gets 90 to 100.

"Reference questions were very few and far between when I first came (in 1999), and we had a lot more time," librarian Marcella Dooney said. "Now there are days where you don't even have a breath in between."

In the early days, mostly retired people visited the library, said Judy Rossee, a library assistant who started working at South County two months before it opened. Now, patrons are a mix of all ages.

Connie Konjevich, 40, and her family moved to Estero two weeks ago from Illinois.

"We're daily visitors," Konjevich said.

She and her children — Blair, 13, Emma, 8, and Andrew, 6 — check out videos and books, of course.

"The only way to get kids reading is to immerse them," Konjevich said.

Cassius Christion, 19, usually stops by every day to check his e-mail and submit job applications on the public computers because he doesn't have Internet access at his Estero home.

Mary Abramson started working at South County library in 1997 as a part-time worker to reshelve books.

"My mother signed the petition circulating to put a library in this area," she said. "She knew I wouldn't come over from Miami unless it had a library.

"I have to have books. I carry them in the car, even to Home Depot when my husband takes me there."

Her son, Christopher, was pictured reading in The News-Press on the day of the library's opening. He's 23.

"He went away to college in Texas. The first thing he did (when he came back) was to renew his library card," his mother said.

SOUTH COUNTY FACTS

- The building was originally a data processing center, and many of its fixtures were recycled or reused. A partnership with Florida Power & Light led to an innovative air-conditioning system that freezes ice during off hours to cool the building in peak hours.
- Square footage: 32,600
- Cost: \$8.5 million, including \$2.5 million for construction
- The library specializes in science and technology.
- First volunteers: Jack McCarthy, who still mends books on Monday and Tuesday mornings, and Bev Baitz
- First Lee County library to have a training computer lab
- Serves as the hub for the Lee County Bookmobile
- Started the library system's e-mail reference service in 2000
- In 2005, launched self-service pickup of items on hold to avoid lines during season
- Decade-long employees: Sally Bissell, Andrea Carter, Betsy Colvin, Sonja Miller, Martin Penney, Judy Rossee, Susan Stewart, Catherine Vaughn

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

- Teen Café: Scene of the Crime: Real-Life Investigations with Cape Coral author and forensic scientist Elizabeth Becka at 7 p.m. Thursday
- Immigration: The Steps to Citizenship with the Amigos Center at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 6; Facts and Perspectives at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 25
- Chess Anyone? from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturdays, Sept. 9, Oct. 7

- Everything You Wanted to Know About Dying but Were Afraid to Ask from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays, Sept. 19, 26, Oct. 3, 10, 17
- Baby-Parent Rhyme Time at 10 a.m. Mondays, Sept. 11, 18, Oct. 2, 16; Toddler Story Time at 10 a.m. Wednesdays; Preschool Story Time at 11 a.m. Tuesdays; Family Story Time at 10 a.m. Tuesdays, 7 p.m. Thursdays
- Book discussions at 2 p.m. on the first Thursday of the month starting Sept. 7 on "The Year of Magical Thinking" by Joan Didion
- Learn to Paint with the Decorative Artists of Southwest Florida at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 24

FRIENDS OF SOUTH COUNTY REGIONAL LIBRARY

- Formed in March 2004, group has more than 200 members and sells books, T-shirts and bags and holds luncheons with local authors to raise money for library supplies, programs and services.
- Membership fees are accepted at the reference desk: students, \$5; individuals, \$15; families, \$25; sponsoring patrons, \$50; corporate/business patrons, \$100; lifetime memberships, \$250.
- The library accepts donations of books, Reader's Digest condensed books, jigsaw puzzles, CDs, audio and videotapes during regular business hours: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

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