

# FAMILY

## Evolving libraries say, 'Check us out'

Toga parties, martini meetups help generate buzz

BY CHRIS MCNAMARA  
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When Ella Neary begins reading, her audience doesn't fully grasp the story. Most of the words are too complicated for Jake, for instance, who fidgets, yawns and periodically licks his hairy legs.

But that happens when you read to dogs.

The sessions at Ford Memorial Library in Western Springs aren't intended to elevate the literacy of hounds but rather those reciting to them each month during the library's read-to-dogs program, which has attracted 100 kids since early 2009.

"This started with the need (for children) to practice oral reading," says Anne Kozak, library director.

"These animals are not judgmental. Some early readers might prefer reading to dogs than to people," added youth services librarian Dana Folkerts, who has been thanked by parents of tykes who shy away from reading at home but shine when their listeners have tails. "Kids bond easily with them."

The program is one of the many unusual ways that libraries throughout Chicagoland are engaging citizens of all ages. Kids can read to dogs, send their stuffed animals on sleepovers or visit a magical forest, and parents can attend a toga party, taste gourmet chocolate or even meet up at a martini bar, all thanks to their local libraries.

"We have worked hard to ensure that libraries aren't frozen in time," said Kozak, whose library in October will host a chess tournament for teens and adults and will help kids build an edible scarecrow. "We're not just preserving relics. We want to make libraries vibrant places that are applicable to peoples' lifestyles. We are a destination for families, with new

programming ideas, new formats and new services that are interesting to them."

It was obvious that the read-to-dogs program has caught the interest of 7-year-old Ella, who casually petted cockapoodle Jake with her right hand and held the book "Nobody's Dog" with her left while confidently breezing through sentences studded with multisyllabic words.

"She loves dogs and she loves to read," said her mother mom Nellie Neary, as Ella nodded in agreement.

The dogs are owned by volunteers with the Hinsdale Humane Society, which staffs the Western Springs program and similar ones at other suburban libraries. The owners insist that their pets enjoy the reading sessions, though they admit the pooches are just as likely thinking about chasing cats as they are following the plot.

While dogs are being read to at the Western Springs library ([fordlibrary.org](http://fordlibrary.org)), musicians can cut an album in a recording studio at the Blue Island Public Library's tech annex ([blueislandlibrary.org](http://blueislandlibrary.org)), and outdoors lovers can borrow fishing poles at nine branches of the Chicago Public Library ([chipublib.org](http://chipublib.org)).

Here's a sampling of other offerings from around the area:

They're exploring paranormal activity at the Westmont Public Library ([westmontlibrary.org](http://westmontlibrary.org)) in late October, followed by a self-hypnosis workshop in November. "I will return my books on time...I will return my books on time..."

The Frankfort Public Library ([frankfortlibrary.org](http://frankfortlibrary.org)) hosts a Fairy Tale Trail, when the facility transforms into a magical forest in which children's stories are acted out among the shelves of books. "It's a way to get kids into the library and interact with these classic fairy tales in a whole new



JOEL WINTERMANTLE/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

Rita, 5, whose mother requested that her last name not be published, reads to Gina McHugh, from the Hinsdale Humane Society, and Jake at the Western Springs Library.

way," said Jennifer Erbach, head of youth services, "then we encourage them to come back and check out these books."

The Orland Park Public Library ([orlandparklibrary.org](http://orlandparklibrary.org)) is hosting a toga party in early October. A week later there's a pie-baking competition at the Oak Park Library. And they're going to decorate gingerbread houses at the River Grove Library ([rivergrovelibrary.org](http://rivergrovelibrary.org)).

The Eisenhower Public Library ([eisenhowerlibrary.org](http://eisenhowerlibrary.org)) in Harwood Heights hosts stuffed-animal sleepovers, when kids leave their teddy bears and plush bunnies with the librarians, who take pictures of the toys making mirth amid the books.

The Berwyn Public Library ([berwynlibrary.org](http://berwynlibrary.org)) oversees a book club that meets at a local martini bar. Not to be outdone, the LaGrange Public Library ([lagrange-library.org](http://lagrange-library.org)) hosts the similar Noir in a Bar. The lit/get-lit group recently read "World War Z," which chronicles the undead

apocalypse, then met in a nearby Thai restaurant to guzzle zombies.

The Crete Public Library ([www.cretelibrary.org](http://www.cretelibrary.org)) hosts a horror film fest throughout October, complete with snacks and creepy trivia contests.

The River Forest Library ([riverforestlibrary.org](http://riverforestlibrary.org)) hosts gourmet chocolate-tasting classes. Over in Woodridge, the public library ([woodridgelibrary.org](http://woodridgelibrary.org)) serves as clubhouse for cross-stitchers. A Scrabble tournament recently enlivened the Evergreen Park Public Library ([evergreenparklibrary.org](http://evergreenparklibrary.org)).

Want to ask a question of Tribune columnist John Kass? Head over to the Hinsdale Public Library ([hinsdalelibrary.info](http://hinsdalelibrary.info)), where he is scheduled to appear Oct. 14 at 7 p.m. (You can submit your questions in advance.)

Budding authors at the Westchester Public Library ([westchesterpl.org](http://westchesterpl.org)) can enter the book-writing contest the library has held since 1982.

The Brookfield Public Library

([brookfieldpubliclibrary.info](http://brookfieldpubliclibrary.info)) hosts a reading-to-dogs program, in addition to video game nights for teens and quilt-making tutorials for their grandparents.

In the Palos-Hickory Hills area, the Green Hills Public Library ([greenhills.lib.il.us](http://greenhills.lib.il.us)) hosts lunches with local legislators. Rather than being shushed, residents are encouraged to vent frustrations to their representatives.

Along with fishing poles for loan, the Chicago Public Library ([chipublib.org](http://chipublib.org)), with 79 outlets, has a host of offerings. The Harold Washington Library Center offers music practice rooms complete with pianos. And patrons can check out murder mysteries or report real crimes at the Clearing Branch, which contains a Chicago Police Department substation.

What will libraries think of next?

"We will change with the wishes of our patrons," says Ford Library's Kozak. "What the library is today should not be what the library is a year from now."