

Piney Woods Edition

# POSTCARDS

November 2016

*Magazine*™

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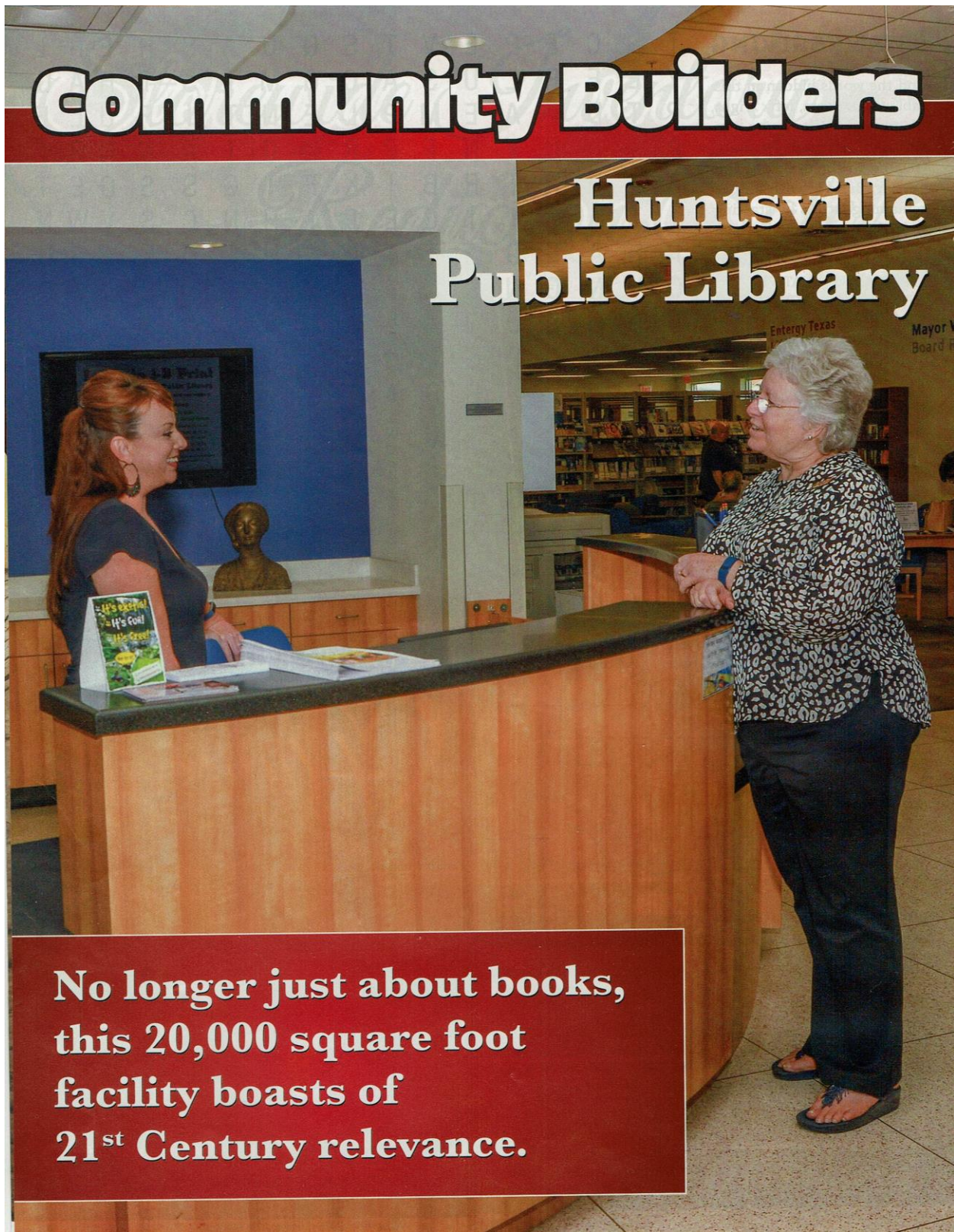
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# Community Builders

## Huntsville Public Library



No longer just about books,  
this 20,000 square foot  
facility boasts of  
21<sup>st</sup> Century relevance.

By Ruth Fields

Photos by Kelly Sue Photography

### Not Your Grandmother's Library

Forget being told "Shhhhh!" by frumpy librarians. Don't worry about being reprimanded to check the card catalog before asking for assistance. And discard the notion that libraries have nothing but books. Huntsville Public Library, now in its sprawling 20,000 square foot facility, boasts a helpful, well-educated staff and a dazzling array of services, including computer classes, one-on-one literacy tutoring, genealogy classes, borrowable DVDs, movie nights for children, and even tai chi lessons.

"I think there are people who think the library is just books," says Anne Sparks, assistant city librarian, who holds two master's degrees, including a Master's in Library and Information Science from the University of Texas at Austin. "Public libraries, especially, have to reinvent themselves because there is so much online. Everything is 'google this' and 'google that.' Libraries have to go outside the box and show that we are still relevant."

For example, in this never-ending quest for relevancy and self-improvement, Mary Kokot, who oversees the library's adult services, has created a popular brown bag lunch series. Each month, the library invites a professor from Sam Houston State University to lecture during a long lunch hour. Other adult programs include classes designed to help immigrants pass the naturalized citizenship exam, and workshops for those who are seeking financial



**BACK ROW  
(LEFT TO RIGHT):**  
Ashley Newsome,  
Anne Sparks,  
Kristin Sion,  
Mary Kokot,  
Riyn Williams  
**FRONT ROW  
(LEFT TO RIGHT):**  
Rachel McPhail,  
Toni Herrington

myhuntsvillelibrary.com

aid for higher education through FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).

Many residents who are interested in genealogy have found that the Huntsville Public Library can provide incalculable help. A weekly genealogy class has an enrollment of about 30 amateur genealogists, but Johnnie Jo Sowell Dickenson, a volunteer who heads the library's genealogy program, says she wishes more people knew about what the library offers. "We are a vital part of this library, and people don't know it," she says. "We are a hidden treasure."

Although Johnnie Jo acknowledges that much genealogical research can be done online, she cautions against total reliance on the internet. "What you find on the internet, you prove for yourself, because there's a lot of false information on the internet," she says. Furthermore, internet findings can be incomplete. Instead of posting actual copies

of documents, such as wills, genealogical web sites often post abbreviated transcriptions that include only what was important to the original researcher. These items may not be the most relevant facts to others.

Johnnie Jo is not the only volunteer at the library. A cadre of faithful library volunteers performs a variety of helpful services, including free one-on-one literacy tutoring for those who struggle with basic reading skills, including those who are learning to speak English. "We rely on volunteers from the community to be our tutors," Mary says, "We just ask that they give two hours a week." The library also offers group literacy classes, including classes in English as a second language.

Ashley Newsome, the library's technology coordinator, oversees the library's vast computer network. She ensures that the library's computer system is functioning >>

properly, while also offering free computer classes to library cardholders. Classes meet on Tuesdays and Fridays from 10 until 11 a.m., and evening classes will be added in January. One class is taught per session, rotating through instruction in Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint; there is also a beginner class for those who are just venturing into the realm of computer technology. In addition, Ashley provides one-on-one help to patrons who utilize the library's computer lab. Common questions are "How do I print this?" (it varies, depending on what is being printed) and "Is it safe to order something from this website?" (yes, if there is a green lock icon immediately to the left of the web address).

Other members of the library staff entertain questions as well. Common questions include those about genealogy, literature, and favorite authors. In addition, library staff members are often asked for help with finding jobs and for assistance with school projects. If librarians aren't able to answer a question, Anne says, they promise to find someone who can. "Every day somebody needs something new

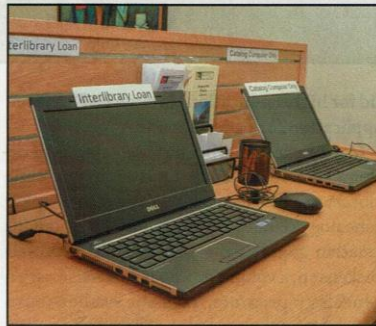
and different," she says. "It's always a challenge, and it's very rewarding to be able to provide that—and that's the most fantastic thing about being a librarian."

### A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Library

The Huntsville Public Library has proudly evolved with technology, and the staff now embraces its use. Gone are the days when overdue books silently racked up late fines. The library kindly e-mails reminders to cardholders who have books that will be due the next day,

and books may be renewed online. Library cardholders can receive e-mail newsletters about upcoming library events, or can follow the library via its website ([myhuntsvillelibrary.com](http://myhuntsvillelibrary.com)), Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The library even has instructional videos on YouTube, and live chat may be available on the library's website in the future.

Although the Huntsville Public Library boasts thousands of printed books, it also offers audio books and OverDrive, a service that provides e-books that can be downloaded



to e-book readers. "You don't have to come to the library," says Linda Dodson, city librarian. "You just have to have a library card." Linda, who holds a master's degree from the University of Texas at Austin in Library and Information Science, has worked at the Huntsville Public Library for 14 years. She helped ease the library through the upheaval of its expansion from 7,000 to 20,000 square feet in 2012. "I'll bet we moved each book five or six times before it was over," she says.

Another technological adaptation allows cardholders to use a smart phone app if they don't have their traditional library cards handy. In addition, patrons can now use PayPal to pay for purchases, such as the cost of copying documents. PayPal can also be used to pay for books in the library's ongoing used book sale, which raises money to purchase books, audio books, DVDs and other library equipment. "Linda is always looking for ways to improve and ways to help the customer," Anne says.

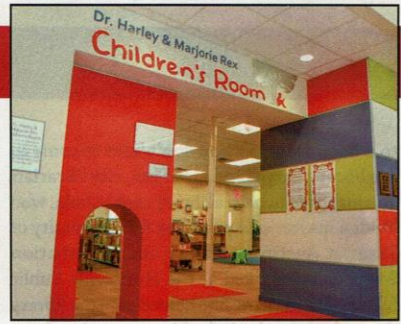
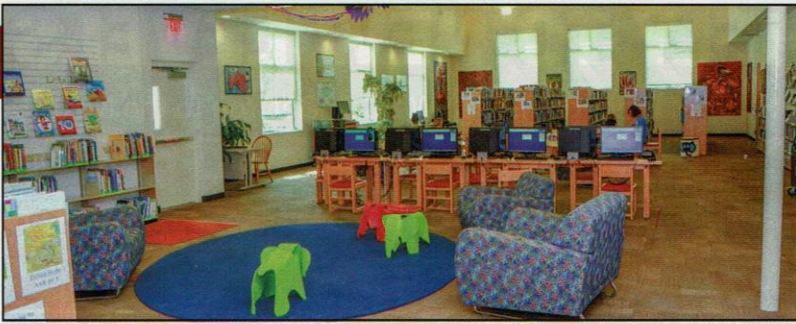
In addition, the library subscribes to many shared databases, including one that offers Pronunciator, which has effectively helped people learn over 80 languages. It is available to library cardholders at no cost. "Sign up the first time at the library, and then you can use it anywhere," Anne says.

### **The Vital Children's Section**

Many patrons first learn about the Huntsville Public Library's extensive services when they visit with their children. "If you get the parents in, you have not only gained children for life, but you have gained parents as well," Anne says. In this endeavor, the library relies on Rachel McPhail, children's coordinator, who holds a bachelor's degree in English from Texas A&M University and plans to pursue a master's degree in library science in the future.

"She's nothing short of a phenomenon. She's brilliant. She thinks so far outside the box >>





to get children in for programming,” Anne says. “It goes beyond story time to make the books come alive for the kids. If you do things that interest them, they will become lifelong readers. I don’t think reading should be boring. They should find it a fun part of daily life.”

“I’ve always liked books,” Rachel says. “If there was a job where you could read for a living, I would probably have it.” Ideas for innovative children’s programs come to Rachel simply by listening to children and paying attention to current events. “If you do the same thing every year,” she says, “it’s boring.”

Among the programs in the children’s department are the annual Teddy Bear Tea and Jedi Academy, a class where children (and

adults) can make objects utilizing a 3D printer, and the Cinderella Ball, which will be held on November 4. Participants can dress as their favorite prince or princess, have their photos made in a pumpkin carriage or while wearing a tiara, all while listening to music from a live orchestra. (*The Cinderella Ball is limited to 120 participants. Online registration is available at [myhuntsvillelibrary.com](http://myhuntsvillelibrary.com).*)

Another popular program, Read with the Dogs, is held on the third Monday of every month. To facilitate this program, the library partners with Huntsville Pets Helping People, which provides canine listeners for struggling readers. Children read to dogs in private cubicles, where they can practice reading orally

without ridicule. “Dogs are non-judgmental,” Anne says.

The second Friday of every month is the children’s department’s Family Movie Night, which includes complimentary popcorn and drinks. This activity is free, and there is no need to sign up in advance. *Ice Age 5* will be featured on November 11, with *Finding Dory* on December 9 and *Secret Life of Pets* on January 13.

For many, the best part about the Huntsville Public Library is that its services are all free. Even the library card itself—unless it is a replacement for a lost card, which costs \$1—is available at no cost. “I would love,” Anne says, “to see every single person in Huntsville have a library card.”