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The June H. Kleeman Reading Center at the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

The genesis of the redesign project for the children's area of the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (MDLBPH) offers productive instructional models for the values inherent in community partnerships. The June H. Kleeman Reading Center, named for a friend of the library and re-opened to the public in 2009, represents a fruitful collaboration between the library and the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Former youth services coordinator Deborah Margolis instigated the project, noting the value of moving the attractive, fun children's materials to a more prominent place within the library (Margolis 63). Major goals for the project included an emphasis on Braille literacy and a dynamic, multi-sensory experience designed to engage children and care-givers on multiple levels.

Conscious of the need to use resources responsibly, Margolis contacted MICA's design department with information about the project. The search ultimately led to graphic design student Lindsey Muir. Muir's interest in tactile typography met the needs of the library, and a partnership was formed that allowed the library to employ a trained designer free of charge. Muir's work on the project provided the infrastructure for her graduate thesis project.

MDLBPH, like the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, of which MDLBPH is a part, offers their services to the community free of charge. To apply for membership persons must provide certification of their eligibility. Eligible persons include

persons who are blind, have low-vision or various print or reading disabilities, and persons with any physical disability which prevents them from utilizing conventional printed material (Library of Congress). There are many groups who benefit from the services offered in the new children's area of the library. These include: children with any of these conditions, and their parents or care-givers, parents or care-givers with any of these conditions and their children.

In preparation for her design, Lindsey Muir engaged in interviews with twelve families from across the state of Maryland who visited the library to learn "what they were looking for in regards to a children's learning environment" (Muir "2012 Email"). Though Muir states that the principles of universal design did not provide the framework for her design choices, her interests in multi-sensory spaces and careful attention to the requirements of the community resulted in a space that fulfills many of the requirements of universal design for learning, including multiple means of representation and engagement (Blue and Pace 51). Muir's thesis "sought to create an environment in which both children and parents can learn braille--in a fun and easy way--while simultaneously engaging the different senses" (Muir "GD MFA Thesis"). The main design feature in the children's room is Muir's tactile learning wall, which features high-contrast colors for engagement of persons with low-vision, a line of interestingly textured fabrics and surfaces at a reachable height for children to touch, and a set of textured animal cutout shapes accompanied by large buttons which, when pressed, play sound recordings of the animals. Beneath these, Muir has installed a row of enlarged Braille cells that can be manipulated by moving soft balls into different positions to spell out words. The multiple means of representation here include high-interest, dynamic colors for those with low-vision, sounds, and textures. The functionality of the wall that enables children to interact with the display presents multiple means of

engagement as children can push buttons to create sounds, move objects to create words, and experience different textures through touch.

In addition to the space itself, the June H. Kleeman Reading Center offers all of the benefits provided by its institution. Numerous resources are available to the community through this service. As a member of the National Library Service, members of MDLBPH have access to audio recordings and Braille books. In addition, visitors to the library and children's reading center can access a specialized kid's computer with adaptive learning software such as ZoomText and JAWS, Kidspiration (a visual learning program for use with children with learning disabilities), and accessible games. The children's area also features a collection of twin-print books that consist of print picture books with clear Braille overlays. These books allow parents and children to enjoy reading together, even if one participant is blind or has low-vision. These types of resources help to enhance intellectual and social accessibility.

The library itself engages in providing physical access in a number of different ways, though providing Braille and audio materials, as well as access to screen reader software and access to materials by mail. The aim of the new children's area, however, is more social in nature. It was designed to bring members of the community into the library and to encourage families to engage in learning together. Through the multiple means of representation present in the space children and care-givers receive not only physical access to information but also intellectual access. The commitment to promoting Braille literacy in this project notes the importance of literacy to "empower the blind to control their learning" (Muir "GD MFA Thesis"). The creation of a safe, inviting space for learning encourages engagement and discussion of the information learned through shared experiences such as the twin-print books.

This sense of “community and belonging” is essential for social access to information (Jaeger 28).

The partnership created in this project to re-design the children’s area at MDLBPH emphasizes the benefits of productive community partnerships. With the voluntary expertise offered by Lindsey Muir on the design for the room, the entirety of the budget for the project was free to be used for materials and minimal labor costs. Painting and installations in the room were completed by the library’s maintenance staff, saving the library money on hiring outside contractors. Abacus, the building’s maintenance company, donated the time of its facilities staff for the project. Many companies offered discounts or wholesale prices on toys and furniture for the project. Muir also created a new website for the children’s department as part of her thesis project. Funding for the redesign was provided solely by the library’s Friends group. The estimated cost of the redesign, including supplies and furniture, was \$7,000 (Margolis 66).

Through this partnership, the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped was able to redesign a welcoming space for community formation for a price far lower than that which would have been necessary to complete the project independently. The June H. Kleeman Reading Center, as a community resource, fulfills a long-term programmatic function, giving the library a space from which to operate its summer reading programs and Braille literacy initiatives, as well as providing on-site technology for public use. The project’s careful attention to the needs of its community of users and the multi-sensory design employed in its execution offer models for institutions looking to upgrade community learning spaces.

Works Cited

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