

Library manager stands ready to reopen the Crescent City branch with new programs

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In March, Beth Austen was just three days into her new job as Del Norte County Library District manager when the governor issued his stay at home order at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

“After three days, I had to shut down all three of our branches, and then, unfortunately, furlough all the staff,” Austen said.

She was able to offer all 10 staffers their jobs back after a month, although library life is very different in these days of social distancing.

“The way I like to think of libraries is a library is not a building, it’s a service. That’s the direction our staff is going right now. Even though the building is closed, we can and are offering many services, just in a different way than it used to be,” Austen said.

The new programs extend to the smaller libraries she oversees in Smith River and the Del Norte Reads branch that hosts the literacy programs.

During the closure, the staff worked on a lot of projects and initiated many virtual services. Austen said program directors offered a lot of outreach, games and activities on social media, Facebook and Twitter, as well as new resources on their website.

For example, Austen started an electronic newsletter and brought back the book drop for curbside services.

“So, it’s kind of like library-books-to-go,” she said. “You call in your order after accessing our electronic catalog. Then our staff comes out to your car. When you’re done, you can come back and just drop it in our book drop. It’s all contact-less.”

“The response has been really good. The community loves it. They’ve been requesting it,” Austen added.

The library also has expanded its summer reading program through the Del Norte Reads Literacy Office. The program teaches literacy skills for both children and adults. Austen said there are currently 125 registrants, 25 of whom are adults.

“Last year we only had 70 people, with only two adults, and we’re hoping to get up to 150,” she said. “It’s the first time it’s gone virtually. We’re one of only a few libraries in California implementing the program. And it’s not too late to sign up, as it goes through July 31.”

The shutdown has also given Austen time to work on a grant that had been approved through the California State Library to provide self-help resources for the low income population, which includes the homeless or at risk for homelessness.

“We’re creating a self-help section in the middle of the library with books, CDs and resources on any type of self help that someone would need, from how to make recipes on a low budget to how to find a job,” Austen explained.

The closure has also given staff time to perform a lot of cleanup, redecorating, painting and get a lot of professional work done. The last step is getting a reopening plan approved by the Del Norte County Public Health Office.

“Once all that is completed, we’ll have a grand opening. We really want to think of ourselves as a hub within the community,” Austen said.

She said the first step of reopening will be for limited hours and patrons will need to make appointments to use the computers or check out book

Staff are in the process of replacing the library’s non-functioning security gate, with assistance from a generous donor.

That will help track statistics of who uses the library which goes toward getting approved for more grants, Austen said.

She added that she couldn’t have gotten through the closure without her excellent staff.

“I’ve had a pretty eclectic job history, but I don’t think I’ve ever had a staff that is as dedicated to the community as this staff is. They truly care about their jobs and the library. It’s just really inspiring to be a part of that,” Austen said.

She said the best way to keep abreast of developments as the library moves toward its reopening phase is by subscribing to its newsletter through the website at www.delnortecountylibrary.org or calling 707-464-7072.