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Yakima Valley Regional Library

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Director: Library is a special place

Profile

By DUANE DOZIER
Of the Herald-Republic

Richard E. Ostrander is responsible for the day-to-day operation of what he describes as "everything you want it to be," and he stresses the "you."

Ostrander this month started his 16th year as director of the Yakima Valley Regional Library in downtown Yakima, a job for which he was selected from among 30 applicants.

His library career goes back about 42 years, to when he was 14 and went to work as a page in the public library in his home town of Holyoke, Mass. He said he had learned to read at an early age through the influence of his parents and became an avid reader. As a library page, he became interested in pursuing library work as a career. He has been happy with his decision.

To Ostrander, a library is a special place. It could be likened to a supermarket of information, knowledge and entertainment, all virtually free, although taxes are the basis of its funding.

"It's everything you want it to be," he said. "It's a school, it's a library, it's a university, it's a community center, it's a place for people to come in ... it's your library. This is something we pound away at — it's your library, it's your facility."

And, with a grand total of 543,089 books, records and materials of every sort — including 270,629 circulating books, 19,942 reference works, 201,000 paperbacks and 12,000 recordings, among other things — the library system and its many and varied facilities and services just about has to be what anyone wants it to be.

Along with the books, magazines, newspapers, tapes and records, and artwork for people who can come to the library to borrow, the library provides a mobile unit for service to such other facilities as nursing homes and a book-by-mail service.

"This is a public library," Ostrander said. "It is for the use and the benefit of the public. It is a place where people come in for books, for reference help, for children's programs, for story programs, for photocopies, for just the opportunity to sit down and read a newspaper in peace and quiet."

For more convenience to the public, the library has been sectionalized to a great extent, with various materials allotted their own special places in the building — tapes and records are in one part, the expanded reference section in another, children's, fiction and large print books in others.

Along with insisting the library is a facility of and for the public, Ostrander becomes upset when anyone comments about Yakima in a denigrating manner.

"I find Yakima an incredibly marvelous community," he said. "I find the reading tastes in this community are varied and very sophisticated. There's nothing that infuriates me more than people saying, 'Well, what do they read over in Yakima?' (The answer is) Everything everybody else is reading and more ... a good reading public."

He indicated that Yakima Valley library patrons have a hunger the library does its best to assuage and the hunger isn't for any one particular fare.

Concentrating just on requests for books, Ostrander said demand is increasing for Spanish-language books, books printed in large print for readers with a sight impairment, the latest fiction and non-fiction works, reference and children's books, along with story hours and other programs for youngsters. Especially popular currently, he said, are Westerns, science fiction and how-to books.

He also said the number of requests for information from the library's reference department is "staggering" and adds, "Categorically, I defy you to find a better reference department than the one we have here."

Ostrander points out that if the local library doesn't have what a patron wants, it has resources and facilities it can turn to and will make every effort to get what is needed.

Ostrander's repeated plea is that members of the public see the library as belonging to them and to "tell us what you want."

The library staff constantly is adding new books and other materials to keep what it offers current, weeding out the outdated materials, "and that's the key" to a good library, according to Ostrander. He commented that, in view of today's changing world, a 10-year-old atlas is virtually worthless to a student and so is a book that is years behind in technological coverage.

Stacks of reviews of books and other materials constantly are received by the library to help in selecting offerings to the public and also as aids in responding to requests.

As for what's in the future, in the 1990s, it's anyone's guess, according to Ostrander, but he promised, "Our whole picture will be increased service to the public, increase in books." The major effort will be to get more and current books in and get them out to the public.

The regional library has only one branch, at North 56th and Summitview avenues in Yakima, but is closely tied into a system that includes 18 community libraries throughout Yakima County.

The regional library is governed by a board appointed by the City of Yakima and Yakima County and with representation from throughout the county, but the community libraries all have their own local boards that see to individual interests and concerns, Ostrander said.

The regional library supplies books and other materials to the community libraries, and generally is a backup for all the community libraries in the county.

Ostrander said the system has 62 full-time-equivalent employees, with about 90 part-timers. That's many fewer than when he become director in 1973, but technology and the addition of computers and other equipment have more than made up the difference, he said.

"What makes this library so good is the staff," he said. "This is an outstanding staff. This is the best library staff and the most responsive staff I have ever seen anywhere in the country. They know the public and they know the community."

The regional library is funded by the city and county, and contracts with the individual community libraries. There also are state and federal grants available but the local library doesn't have any now.

The budget, not including maintenance, salaries and related day-to-day operations, includes $335,000 for books, $40,000 for periodicals and $18,000 for records and tapes, Ostrander said.

(Staff photo by Kirk Hirota)

Name: Richard E. Ostrander.

Occupation: Director, Yakima Valley Regional Library.

Age: 56.

Born: Holyoke, Mass.

Education: Bachelor's degree in history and master's degree in library science from Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y.

Career background: Came to Yakima in August 1973 from Lincoln, Neb., where he was assistant director of Lincoln public library; also has been coordinator of branches for Woodbridge, N.J., Free Public Library and librarian at Yonkers public library in Yonkers, N.Y. Has held positions in professional organizations and recently was appointed to the Washington State Library Commission, concerned with representation of people on this side of the state.

Family: Wife, Constance; son, Gary Ostrander; daughters, Elaine and Anita Ostrander; one grandchild, Christopher Ostrander.

Relaxation: "I read constantly," favoring the most current material coming out. "I'm a big Western fan and a science fiction fan" and also enjoys good historical material. He also is a stamp collector. And, each Saturday, he visits community libraries to give them and him an opportunity to meet and talk informally.

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