

Book Report

Communicating in Crisis, the COVID Challenge

In mid-February, Elissa Andre was just starting her new job as external communications manager for Johnson County Library, planning to use her marketing expertise to highlight and promote all the Library's services.

Laura Hunt was a veteran branch manager but just starting a newly-established position as internal communications manager, planning ways to enhance Library staff interactions and cohesiveness.

Then the COVID-19 emergency shut down the branches on March 14. Suddenly, Andre and Hunt didn't have the luxury of settling into their new roles. They were confronting an unprecedented crisis that made communications all the more urgent and important. Fortunately, they quickly forged a great working relationship. As Andre says, "We're two halves of the same brain."

It became imperative to communicate well with both the public and the staff, and Andre and Hunt collaborated on many of those tasks. Andre and her team quickly ramped up content about the closure and all the online resources, through the Library's website, social media and email marketing. She worked with TV and other media to spread the word about MakerSpace innovations on masks and 3D printer face shields.

Frequent updates kept the public aware of the reopening process. "I am so thankful for how supportive the Library has been as a whole. My team has been really welcoming," Andre says. "The administration has gone above and beyond. Working with the public is fun. It's exciting to see the impact your work is having."

In early May she received an email from a marketing professional complimenting the Library's communication. "That came on a day that was very stressful," she recalled. "It was one of those moments of grace."

To keep staff up to speed, Hunt created an informative weekly newsletter, and made it fun with photos of people's home-based "co-workers," (pets and children). Employees have praised her outreach. She also navigated the legal restrictions on communicating with furloughed workers. "In those early days, staff knew things were happening in the world and there was this sense of fear and anxiety," Hunt said. "None of us knew what to expect. Staff just wanted information, what decisions were being made."

Hunt and Andre co-wrote detailed reports and presentations about the

closing and reopening process that elaborated on preparedness, messaging and phasing. It was an all-consuming job working from home, and some nights they were still collaborating at 11 p.m.



Communication Managers Laura Hunt, L, and Elissa Andre, R, coordinating communication for the Library during COVID.

Meanwhile, race relations have also become a flashpoint, and the Library has a role there too. People searching the website have discovered the Race Project KC educational initiative, prompting an impressive uptick in grassroots donations. Andre is determined to make the most of this opportunity. "It will support the next school year's initiative," she said. "This is a moment."

Despite all the challenges and intensity, for Andre this is her "dream job," with talented co-workers and passionate patrons. Hunt is pleased that her Library knowledge compliments Andre's marketing skills, giving them the foundation to build a strong communications department.

"Right now we're still focusing on just getting things open and making sure everyone has the information they need to get open," Hunt said. "But we've started digging into the procedural side of the department and thinking through the infrastructure we need to make things work more effectively."

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June 2020

BRANCHING OUT

Blue Valley Branch – Getting Back in the Building

Blue Valley is known as one of Johnson County Library's busiest branches, with thousands of materials circulating each month out of the facility at 9000 W. 151st Street in southern Overland Park. But the beehive of activity has been on a whole new order of magnitude during the past few months of COVID-19, even as the branch was closed to the public and then as it opened back up.

Responding to the pandemic has required flexibility and learning on the fly, and Branch Manager Stephanie Bailey is grateful for the entire system's support. That was especially apparent when the book-drop and drive-thru service resumed in May at Blue Valley, Lenexa City Center and Monticello.

Blue Valley was particularly slammed, with massive piles of books returned and cars backed up around the building as patrons began picking up their holds. It was a dramatic illustration of the public's pent-up craving for Library services. Top managers, including Library administrators Ben Sunds and Tricia Suellentrop, helped out, along with reinforcements from other branches.

"We have survived. That's been a testament to how well we work as a Library organization," said Bailey, who has been Blue Valley's branch manager for about two and a half years. "We have had a lot of extra help since we've seen so much more traffic and so many more items." It's been overwhelming at times, but also reassuring. "Seeing



Assistant Branch Manager Dev Tillotson with new signage at the entry.

our whole system come together so we can help each other out has been a treat to see," she said.

For Bailey, these past few months have been so intense that they are kind of a blur, but she says staff has weathered the storm, with good communication and a positive attitude. An empty conference room was converted into a place to quarantine books for 72 hours. Meanwhile, Bailey and many others worked hard to manage the snaking line of cars through the drive-thru,



Library clerk Thomas Parks serving library drive-thru users.

cutting the wait time significantly. The process works well with one person at the window, another outside collecting library cards, and a third pulling materials.

On June 15, the branches began reopening, with reduced hours. Previously, Blue Valley and all the buildings underwent a deep cleaning and sanitizing, and ongoing cleaning will be emphasized.

In normal times, Blue Valley is full of tables and chairs because it is heavily used for tutoring. But for now,

patrons are not encouraged to linger, so much of that furniture has been removed to a storage facility. At some point, all of that will return. "It will be back, no worries," Bailey promises. Computers are available, but users are socially distanced. New signage provides direction and guidance.

Bailey praises Nancy Birmingham and the rest of the team tasked with planning the reopening process.



Library clerk Zainab Fatima and page Kelley Sagduyu discharging returned materials.

Matt Hammes, a Blue Valley assistant branch manager, has also been integral to that effort. "So we have an expert at our branch. That has been very helpful," Bailey said.

No one knows when things will finally get back to normal, but Bailey said the Library has an excellent playbook to navigate these highly unusual times. Its top priority, as always, will be to serve the public in the best way possible, while keeping staff and patrons safe and healthy.

"Once we are back in the building we don't want to lose sight of our online presence," he urged. "We have found we can use technology."



Library page Cassie White shelving returned books, and new signage.

PATRON SPOTLIGHT

Young Artist Donates Prize to Friends

Katherine Feng is a dedicated young artist and library enthusiast. She helped organize a drawing club at her branch library, where she also does her homework. She and her sister Madeline and brother Benjamin enter the annual Friends of Johnson County Library bookmark design contest. "The storytime at the library was my kids' first social event," says their mom Judy Feng. "We register for study rooms at the library, not to mention all the wonderful books we can check out. Life with Johnson County Library is so enjoyable!"

Katherine has twice been named a winner in the Friends' annual contest (2018 and 2019), so she entered the 2020 contest with high hopes. She was naturally disappointed when the 2020 winners list did not include her name, but kept working at her art. "She first learned to love drawing from the bookmark contest," said her mom. "She said she will try again next year."

Katherine had also entered a contest sponsored by the local Rice Gallery of Fine Art, and was named a winner. The

award, says her mother, was comforting and encouraged her to keep drawing. Katherine let her mother know she wanted to donate her prize money to the Friends of Johnson County Library. "As parents, we feel very proud for Kathy's unexpected and lovely decision about her award," says Judy Feng.

The Friends are pleased to welcome Katherine Feng as a Sponsor-level member. Her gift supports Friends activities and programs like the annual Bookmark Design Contest. Thank you, Katherine!

TOP E-HOLDS

JULY 2020

- **White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism** by Robin J. DiAngelo
- **The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz** by Erik Larson
- **Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know** by Malcolm Gladwell
- **Such a Fun Age** by Kiley Reid
- **The Silent Patient** by Alex Michaelides
- **Dear Edward** by Ann Napolitano
- **Untamed** by Glennon Doyle
- **American Dirt** by Jeanine Cummins
- **The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes** by Suzanne Collins
- **The Hate U Give** by Angie Thomas



Katherine Feng, circled, at the 2019 Friends Bookmark Design Contest award ceremony.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Furloughed Clerk Happy to Return to JCL



Library clerk Jeremy Anderson seated behind a new plexi shield at Cedar Roe.

Jeremy Anderson, who has been a Cedar Roe Library clerk since April 2019, left the Roeland Park branch after his shift on March 13 (yes, Friday the 13th) thinking he would be back in the building the following week.

Instead, he got the news that Johnson County Library branches were shutting down indefinitely as of 5 p.m. March 14 because of the rapidly-spreading Coronavirus. Anderson and his colleagues worked from home for a few weeks, and fit in some online staff development courses. But then he learned he would be furloughed, indefinitely. Candidly, that was hard.

“That was really kind of scary,” he admits. “When you don’t know how much time it’s going to be, it’s nerve-wracking.”

Many Johnson County Library employees continued working from home. But clerks work face-to-face with the public, helping patrons with library cards, fines, holds, book recommendations and questions about their accounts. They also help manage the collection. It’s a customer service job that Anderson loves, but he couldn’t do it from home. He became one of 213 Library staff members, including pages and other circulation employees, whom

Johnson County reluctantly furloughed in early April.

Anderson is grateful to the County’s HR department for helping to sign up furloughed employees for unemployment benefits. So he quickly began receiving payments and never experienced the Kansas unemployment website hassles that many people did. “The Library also continued our benefits which was great,” he said. He didn’t need to avail himself of any health care services, but it was reassuring to know he could.

Anderson is grateful to his boss and co-workers for keeping in touch and supporting each other. “I think everyone had a similar experience,” he says. The attitude was: “This is really stressful and scary, but we’ll get through it.”

He did find ways to break the tension. Several friends introduced him to an activity he’d never been interested in before: online multiplayer video games. It was engrossing and fun. He also attended an online birthday party for a friend that was especially meaningful because it Zoomed in people from California and New York.

When the book drop resumed May 18 at Monticello, Blue Valley and Lenexa,

Anderson leaped at the chance to help out. He had done stints at all three branches since he was first hired by Johnson County Library as a page in May 2018. He was assigned to Lenexa, where workers received thousands of books checked out months ago and prepared them to recirculate. Anderson also helped customers in the drive-thru, which did a brisk business. The service counted 217 patron interactions one day, far more than in normal times.

Patrons were thrilled, and their comments reinforced for Anderson how much the Libraries mean to people. Even better, all furloughed workers who wished to return were back by June 8, and the buildings reopened for limited service June 15.

Anderson looked forward to re-connecting with Cedar Roe regulars. It’s what makes the cherished neighborhood branch such a special place to work. “This branch has a lot of very loyal patrons. Patrons who care about the branch and about the role it plays in this community,” he said. “I like talking to our patrons and helping them find stuff. Everyone is very appreciative.”



Library clerk Jeremy Anderson, in face mask, seated behind a new plexi shield at Cedar Roe.

EVENTS SPOTLIGHT

Library Lets Loose Virtual Edition

Since 2016, the Johnson County Library Foundation’s biggest annual event and fundraiser has been “Library Lets Loose,” attracting about 500 people to Central for an evening of games, music, dancing, food and fun. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March, it quickly became apparent that such an event couldn’t be held this year. The Foundation briefly considered cancelling, but decided to forge ahead with a virtual event that people can enjoy from home.

“We have found that people want to support the Library and this event is a perfect fit for them,” says Foundation Executive Director Stephanie Stollsteimer. “This year has been so weighted by uncertainty for everyone. If anyone has the capacity to give, we can help them with a way to do that. We want to join everyone to cultivate the community spirit of the Library.”

This year’s event is scheduled for Sept. 12, and planning is well underway. More details will soon be available on the Foundation website, <https://www.jocolibraryfoundation.org/events-opportunities/library-lets-loose/>

In the past, participants have bought a \$75 ticket. This year’s event will be free, although donations are always welcome and encouraged. Attendees will view a brief presentation, then move to a variety of virtual rooms offering storytelling, trivia, games, musical performances and other entertainment. “We’re hosting interactive activities where people can participate from their home,” Stollsteimer said. “Some of it will be live, some recorded.”

The event also relies on dedicated volunteers. This year the effort is led by honorary hosts Cindy Wallis-Lage and Kent Lage. Stollsteimer praised the hosts, both engineers, for their can-do spirit in the face of the pandemic. In a letter inviting event sponsorships, the hosts urged continued financial support to help sustain Johnson County Library as a vital community resource.

“The current world emergency has highlighted the value of readily available learning resources for our community during a time with so much uncertainty,” they wrote. “As a valued partner in our community, the Library has remained available 24/7 with online resources for education, news, and entertainment.”

Kent Lage is an urban services manager with Johnson County Public Works. Cindy Wallis-Lage is a top executive with Black & Veatch, which is the lead corporate sponsor of Central’s MakerSpace. Both Black & Veatch and MakerSpace epitomize innovation, creativity and productivity – qualities needed now more than ever.



Library Lets Loose honorary hosts Cindy Wallis-Lage and Kent Lage.

Cindy Wallis-Lage said that growing up in Topeka, she visited the Library every week and it instilled in her a lifelong love of reading. “That was my place to go, all through high school, it was that sanctuary,” she said. As she and her husband raised three children in Johnson County, libraries were a big part of their lives and learning.

She said continuing the Library Lets Loose event this year is worthwhile, “to show how the Library is very agile,” and an important resource for information about different cultures in our world. “We can continue to support the community, whether it’s walking in in person or doing it virtually,” she said.

Additional sponsors are welcome and can contact Stollsteimer at stollsteimers@jocolibrary.org.

While COVID-19 poses unique challenges, Stollsteimer knows that the Foundation’s supporters, like the Library they love, are resilient and adaptable, and this year’s event will illustrate that. “We are all finding our way together,” she said. “Libraries and communities need each other, and we’ll persevere.”

Library Lets Loose

Virtual Edition



Social Media Highlights

Johnson Co. Library
@jocolibrary

Yesterday Blue Valley, Monticello, and Lenexa City Center Library drive-thrus checked out 1,424 items to a total of 544 patrons!

Here's a picture of the drive-thru line at Blue Valley, and a picture of the Holds list at Lenexa - definitely a record-setter!



10:09 AM · May 27, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Drive thru at Blue Valley and LX send item list:
<https://twitter.com/jocolibrary/status/1265661497792966656>



jocolibrary · Follow
Johnson County Library - Lenexa Cit...

jocolibrary Lenexa City Center Library has incredible angles, even when plastic wrapped. Have you ever gone misty eyed at the sight of the library? Lenexa has seen it happen. Thank you for your care, intentionality, and love as we move forward into uncharted waters. Things are changing for now, and we're all making difficult adjustments to try to keep staff and you safe. We'll get through it together, and some day things will feel safe and okay again. First photo a repost from @theunreadshelf.

22h

theunreadshelf I'm so glad that

99 likes
22 HOURS AGO

Log in to like or comment.

The beauty of LX
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBliS07JHip>

Johnson Co. Library
@jocolibrary

Last week we began the re-opening process. First, the drive-thrus. Here is a time lapse inside and out of Blue Valley Library. One full day of hold pickups and returns condensed down to 2 minutes. Phew!



Blue Valley Drive Thru Time Lapse
At the the end of May, 2020, after our branches had been closed due to the COVID-19 crisis, we began the re-opening ...
@youtube.com

2:25 PM · Jun 4, 2020 · Twitter Web App

First day back at drive thru from Blue Valley:
<https://twitter.com/jocolibrary/status/1268624885007503360>
<https://youtu.be/kSButFq6T0k> - video link



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5d

Who's your reading buddy?
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBZeZd-Jh5c>

Month in Review

JUNE 2020



Library clerk Subhra Mullick gathering books after 72-hour quarantine at Lenexa City Center.



Custodial Supervisor Chay Her, center, training on PPE and cleaning at Lenexa City Center.



Central Assistant Branch Manager Lisa Jordan being interviewed about Re-opening.



Monticello Asst. Branch Manager Michelle Holden being interviewed by KSHB reporter Jacob Morgan.



Library users line up at Blue Valley to return materials and pick up holds.

NEXT ISSUE



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-  **Branching Out:** Creating a Virtual Branch
-  **Patron Spotlight:** Women & Money
-  **Staff Spotlight:** Hope Harms, eResources Librarian
-  **Events:** Career & Finance Weekly Programs

JOHNSON COUNTY KANSAS

Library

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*As you can see by these posts, the Johnson County library system continues to thrive even in these difficult times!
Thank you for your support!*