

Rebounding from rock bottom

More computers, activities boost Orange library's present and future

By John Zucal
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Ten months ago, the Orange Public Library reached its lowest point in decades when a "CLOSED" sign was placed on its front doors for two months.

Today, however, it is in the midst of a transformation which employees and a board member said they believe will return the library to its respected status of earlier decades.

In April 2010, the library was closed by the city's health officer after asbestos and lead was found within and on the walls. It was reopened two months later after remediation, and library officials and trustee-board members have begun the process of making the library more than just a place for books and research.

"We've been going on six months as a new board, and we're trying to increase our activities with new programming, trying to raise the library to the standard of neighboring communities," said Imani Banks, president of the trustee board.

Banks said the activities include Saturday art classes for children ages 5 through 11 and a "story lady," who will read Saturdays at 10 and 11 a.m. and noon in the children's library.

Mary Bonds, cataloger and principal library assistant, has worked in the library since 1971. Bonds said the library was vibrant when she started, and while the transformation will take time, she hopes its life from four decades ago will be restored.

"We had an after-school program and an outreach program," said Bonds. "We've seen quite

a bit of change in the last three months, and it's a work in progress."

Kevin Lee has been the library's maintenance supervisor for just a month, but said he knows how much work had gone into the repairs.

"I came to look at the library job as a contractor," said Lee of the time when the trustee board sought contractors to conduct the remediation. "One thing turned into another — it would have been more than just giving out work: it needed a soul."

Lee said he left "a good job" to come to the library, but, "It's satisfying; I know we're making a difference, and I haven't been proven wrong yet."

Among the changes to the library was the opening of the east side to more seating as well as a bank of 15 computers. That cluster, said Imani Banks, has led to the formation of weekend classes for residents by instructor Jamaal Banks.

"There was a huge community need for computer skills and resume building as well as Internet searching," said Jamaal Banks, who noted the classes average 10 students. While children are learning computer skills in school, he said many adults in urban areas lack the skills they need to survive in today's world, especially as it relates to employment.

"It's essential," said Jamaal Banks. "If you want to get a job, you have to know how to get around the Internet."

The research room, opposite the computer area, formerly contained a smaller number of

computers. It resulted in cramped quarters, especially when students arrived after school to use them. The moving of the computers has left a research room that's airy and relaxed.

Lora White, a library assistant for five years, said she has noticed the building's interior work has payed off in more than just the physical improvement.

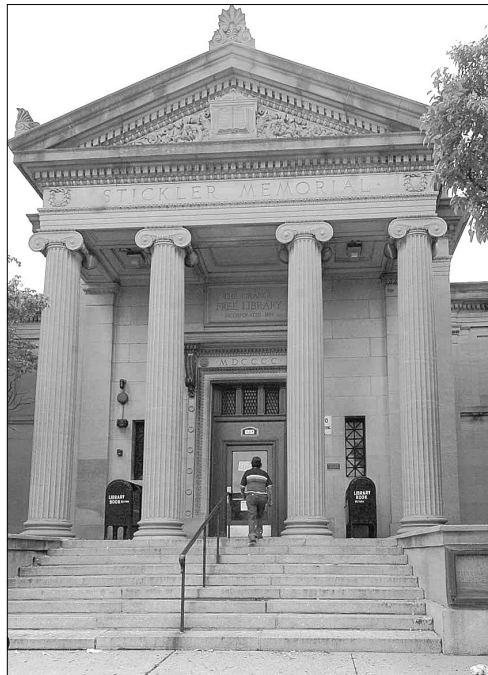
"Since they did that, it has improved tremendously," said White, referring to the increase in use of the library by residents.

Imani Banks said the trustee board also is promoting the availability of meeting rooms for community usage. This would not only provide additional space for meetings or fundraisers, she said, but it would provide the library with exposure.

While improvements, physical and programming, have occurred, Imani Banks said work is still necessary to the structure of the century-old building designed by famous architect Stanford White.

Since the library received a \$750,000 Capital Preservation Grant from the New Jersey Historical Trust in 2006, library-board members have made attempts to raise matching funds. The results, however, have been minimal. Now, she said, a new attempt to raise funds is in the planning stages.

When asked Monday if the grant was still active, a spokesman for the trust said grants usually stay available as trust members realize that factors such as securing matching grants and contracting for work must enter into any project.



File photo

Since the Orange Public Library reopened in June 2010 following a two-month closure, staffers and trustees have attempted to increase public interaction by adding to the activities the library hosts.