

THE Q MUNITY COLUMN

BY FIONA O'CONNOR

The Atwater Library's home delivery service bridges the gap between generations of Montrealers, one book at a time.

For many of us, winter can be the perfect excuse to stay home, grab a book off the shelf, and save our love of the outdoors for the first thaw. For many others though, our longest season poses not only the usual array of day-to-day inconveniences, but also the risk of deepening social isolation.

Part mobile-library, part community outreach, the Atwater Library's Downtown Home Delivery Service is a meals-on-wheels-style book delivery program geared towards downtown residents living with a loss of autonomy. Using books as the central point of contact, the program serves the dual purpose of building bridges between different generations of Montrealers, while responding to both the social and intellectual needs of those it serves.

"The focus is not just on book delivery, but also on the connections that are made," says library assistant Alanna MacNevin, who currently coordinates the service. "It's not just about getting in there, delivering the books, and getting out," she adds, emphasizing the importance of the intergenerational friendships that are created through the mutual love of reading and conversation.

With the help of start-up funds from Canadian Heritage, the Home Delivery Service was established in March 2010 under the direction of Beth Symansky, the Atwater Library's Intergenerational Programs Coordinator and Acting Manager of Administration and Development.

"It was started because patrons were requesting deliveries, and so volunteers and staff were taking it upon themselves to do the deliveries," explains MacNevin, who graduated with a Master's degree in Library Information Studies from McGill last year. MacNevin says that it was through these actions that the idea of a structured program came about and organizers embarked on applying for a grant.

Almost a year later, the service engages a total of fifteen participants and seven volunteers. While principally aimed at seniors—a highly represented but often underserved segment of the urban population—the home delivery service is available to any Atwater Library member who requests a need for it. "If people want to use the service they can call up and inquire about it," says MacNevin.

In line with the program's emphasis on creating personal connections and a strong sense of community, MacNevin and the volunteer team work hard to meet the individual wishes of each program participant. Literary tastes and specifications regarding preferred book formats (hard cover, soft cover, audio book, etc.) are first established through a confidential questionnaire, and from there, volunteers keep an open dialogue with participants through weekly phone calls and bi-weekly book deliveries (the program has the same two-week loan period as the library).



PHOTO: FIONA O'CONNOR

BETH SYMANSKY (LEFT), ALANNA MACNEVIN: MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGH THE LOVE OF READING

Twenty-six-year-old MacNevin, who originally hails from Prince Edward Island, says that what she enjoys most about her job is the opportunity it provides to interact equally with both the providers and recipients of the service. "I think it appeals more to my sense of community work, more so than being strictly related to my academic credentials," she says. While volunteers range in age, background and occupation, MacNevin adds that "delivering books and meeting the participants is also really good because they're just very interesting people that have interesting stories. Once you get to know the clients who you're delivering to, you get attached to them..."

In addition to enjoying her post as program coordinator, MacNevin quips that it's likely the role she's best suited to, admitting that her own love of books can occasionally wind up hindering the execution of time-sensitive tasks. "I'm glad that I have book selectors, because they're very quick. They choose the book and then that's the book that they've chosen, whereas I enjoy it too much and think about it for far too long!"

While the Home Delivery Service attributes much of its early success to word-of-mouth, organizers are now working to develop new marketing approaches that will increase the program's visibility and help it to grow. In addition to using trademark book bags on delivery routes, the library is tapping into publicity opportunities through its partnerships with like-minded community organizations, including Santropol Roulant, which has distributed flyers for the service along with its meals, and the Yellow Door, which has run ads for the service in its publication. The library has also worked with Westmount's Connectivity Centre and the CLSC to promote awareness of the delivery service among its clientele.

The Atwater Library Home Delivery Service is an ever-growing community initiative that welcomes new participants at any time. If you or anybody you know may be interested in this service or in volunteering, please contact Beth Symansky at (514) 935-7344. For more information you can also visit the Atwater Library website at <http://www.atwaterlibrary.ca/library/New-Home-Delivery-Service>.

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