

Downtown delivery service offers Dickens and DVDs instead of beer and bread

BY MIKE BOONE, THE GAZETTE MARCH 10, 2010

Having watched enough episodes of Mad Men to gain at least a rudimentary appreciation of advertising, I think Words on Wheels works better than "intergenerational programming."

The latter is how the Atwater Library is describing its new home delivery service. Downtown residents living with a loss of autonomy can have books, magazines, audio books or DVDs delivered to their homes.

Funded by the Canadian Heritage Department and the Ville Marie borough, the program helps combat the isolation of people who don't get around much anymore. As is the case with Meals on Wheels, young volunteers pay visits and chat up clients.

The social component is important. It's not just tossing The Magic Mountain over the transom with a hurried wham, bam, thank you, Mann.

"This is more than the simple delivery of library materials," says Lynn Verge, an ex-pat Newfoundlander who's been the energetic and innovative executive director of the Atwater Library since October 2005.

"We try to pair young delivery people with homebound recipients."

The service is aimed primarily at downtown residents who are "elderly and frail," she said, as well as those whose mobility is diminished by illness or injury.

Home delivery clients can keep their reading or viewing choices for up to two weeks.

Home delivery is available, to those in need, as part of their annual Atwater Library dues, \$20 a year for people age 60 or older, \$20 for six months to a maximum of \$35 a year for younger members.

Being in the former category, I have fond memories of home deliveries by neighbourhood groceries and drugstores. Before there was a dépanneur within walking distance of every breathing citizen, essentials would be conveyed to one's home by an adolescent on a black bicycle with a front basket large enough to accommodate a case of two-four and tires wide enough to handle the snow.

The Atwater Library - a private institution that runs on an annual budget of less than \$500,000 - might consider delivery partnerships with depts or the SAQ.

Under the Volcano, a fifth of tequila and you're laughing. But for now, it's reading material and DVDs.

The home delivery program is being run by Beth Symansky, a Montrealer who gained expertise in home services by working for a food bank in Vancouver. The Atwater Library project is recruiting volunteer couriers from Dawson College, and Concordia and McGill universities.

Home delivery is not an Atwater Library invention. The service is offered by the Westmount and Jewish Public libraries, but the Atwater's is the first such program in downtown Montreal - specifically the Peter McGill district, which runs from Atwater Ave. to University St.

"We suspected there was a need," Verge said, "and over the last couple of years we've made inquiries and received occasional requests."

Among those consulted was Santropol Roulant. The Plateau Mont Royal food service, Verge says, "delivers meals in a way to foster intergenerational friendships."

"One of the big goals is that each visit will be a social occasion that will be enjoyable for the person doing the delivery and the recipient," Verge said. "The initial visit lasts about half an hour and fulfills that hope."

Clients fill out a questionnaire on their tastes and interests. This information helps the library suggest reading or viewing the patron might enjoy.

Or not. You wouldn't want the Sleeping Beauty series delivered to anyone with a pacemaker.

For more information on the Atwater Library's home delivery program, phone 514-935-7344. On the Web: www.atwaterlibrary.ca

mboone@thegazette.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette