

'For my dear Atwater library' — Leonard Cohen

Only community library in city west of St. Denis continues its mission

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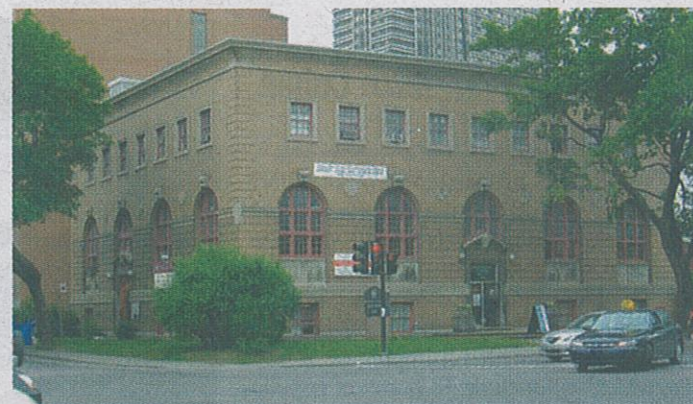
As written in a 1994 edition of Cohen's seminal *Flowers for Hitler*, it's always good to know our generation's favorite poet isn't the only one who cares about the venerable old library located on the corner of Atwater and Tupper just across the street from the Montreal Children's Hospital.

"The object of this institute is to afford instruction and knowledge in the Arts, Sciences and Industries."

Carved into the wall above the library's well-attended circulation desk, the preceding sentence has just as much to say about the library's present mission as it did when the Montreal Mechanic's Institute first opened its doors in 1828. While it is only 17 years short of its 200th birthday, the library now has over 38,000 books in its stacks along with a sophisticated computer centre which can supply a full range of post modern digital services suitable for the 21st century. As mentioned in one of the library's early brochures now on display in its well-lit reading room, "free classes may be formed and lectures given on popular and interesting subjects." While it may be a different world from the one that existed when the brochure first appeared on the library's circulation desk, the library has not forgotten its original mission and as of last week, its website advertised 12 different ongoing programs and services including its own new digital literacy program. Apart from its books, its DVDs and other assorted material, the

library offers computer courses for the digitally challenged, a home delivery book service for the physically challenged, a book club, a noontime lecture series and its own poetry project. Other facilities include the building's well-lit reading room along with its basement book shop which many of the city's bibliophiles consider to be one of Montreal's best-kept secrets. As an ongoing cultural institution, the library is also a living reflection of Montreal's vibrant cultural and political history. As found among the artifacts in the library's new reading-room exhibition, a French-language copy of *Les Oeuvres de Molière* (dated 1828) can be seen alongside another one of Montreal's own early French language editions about Jesuit Saint Francois Xavier and his life among the Japanese. Other items include an English language translation (American) of *The Koran* (dated 1833) which lies in the same display case as does Cohen's autographed *Flowers for Hitler*. Self-styled authors might be inspired when they see a copy of Stephen Leacock's original *Literary Lapses* — a small book of comic sketches for which the Leacock paid 15 and a half cents per copy for a private press run of 300 copies. When a British publisher bought a copy of Leacock's book for 35 cents for some light reading on the boat on his way back to England, Leacock hit the jackpot. The publisher enjoyed the book so much he immediately offered Leacock a contract to publish the book's second edition.

"We couldn't do it without our volunteers," said Lynn



Verge, the library's executive director. After telling *The Suburban* how the library managed to pay for all of its operations with less than a \$500,000 annual budget, she also mentioned how the Atwater Library was the only community library in the city west of La Grande Bibliothèque on Berri Street in the downtown core. With over 150 volunteers doing everything from the gardening to replacing books in the stacks, Verge said the library is doing as well as it is because of their efforts. Apart from working on a recent \$425,000 National Historic Sites Cost-Sharing agreement, subsidies from both Westmount and the City of Montreal only provide 11 percent of the library's annual budget. While Verge said the library's direction appreciates all the help it can get from both Montreal (\$20,700) and the City of Westmount (\$25,000), the Atwater Library's corner location once again proves how "location, location, location," continues to dominate Montreal's cultural environment. Just as Montreal's cultural landscape continues to lie in the square kilometre located in and around La Grande

Bibliothèque and the city's new Quartier des Spectacles, Westmount's cultural mainstream continues to flow around the vortex of its own municipal library within the park near its own Victoria Hall. While close to its downtown roots, the Atwater Library is still located on the fringe of both cities and therefore must continue to fight for its place within Montreal's cultural landscape as well as

among the city's various arts bureaucracies.

Even as Verge admits the library continues to cater to its core group of supporters and members within the city's anglo community, she also stressed how the library is also doing everything it can to maintain its presence within the inner city's increasingly diversified and multi-cultural communities with over 90,000 people having taken advantage of the library and its programs. ■