

Storyville: Baltimore County Public Library

Promoting Baltimore County Public Library's Storyville

SUMMARY OF PROJECT

Storyville is an interactive early literacy learning center located inside the Rosedale Branch of the Baltimore County Public Library. Storyville is made possible by funds raised by the Foundation for Baltimore County Public Library. The 2,250 square-foot child-sized village includes developmentally appropriate books, materials and activities for children, ages birth to five, to use interactively with adults. The environments and activities in Storyville are specifically designed for parents and caregivers to help their young children enter Kindergarten with the skills they need for school success.

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In 2004-05, a report was released showing only 65% of children entering kindergarten in Baltimore County were rated as "fully ready" on a composite score of the Work Sampling System (WSS) which tests school readiness skills in young children with only 55% rated as "fully ready" in the areas of Language and Literacy. Parents and early child care providers needed resources that help them understand school readiness skills and provide models of activities and experiences for developing those skills, and Baltimore County Public Library developed an idea to help provide these resources in a fun and creative manner: create a place to be known as Storyville.

Storyville was a new concept when it opened. Not only was there nothing like it in the state of Maryland, as far as we knew, there was nothing like it in the country. As a result, a strategic marketing plan needed to be developed that would promote Storyville as well as explain the concept to both potential users and potential Storyville supporters. The entire premise for creating a program like Storyville was to increase access for very young children to materials and programs that foster emergent literacy and appropriate development which help children enter school ready to learn. By communicating the need for and benefits of Storyville to the community where it would be located and the region as a whole, we hoped to increase access to materials and programs that would prepare children to enter school ready to learn.

While all children and their parents/caregivers could benefit from exposure to the activities and information provided in Storyville, some communities did have greater need. This was taken into consideration when choosing Storyville's location. The communities on the eastern side of Baltimore County exhibited a broad range of family income levels from moderate to low, many single-parent households, frequent instances of low birth-weight babies, and high numbers of children registered for free and reduced price school meals. There are nine census tracts in the Rosedale market area of Baltimore County. In the 2000 census the average median household income for those tracts was \$47,483. The census tracts with the highest and lowest median incomes had medians of \$54,221 and \$42,467 respectively. Of the nine census tracts in the Rosedale market area, the percentage of households below the poverty level based on 1999 income was 5.6%. For these reasons, the Rosedale Library, located on the eastern side of Baltimore County, was chosen as the best site for the Storyville Project. Our challenge was to communicate the needs and benefits of Storyville to all area residents, not just those in the Rosedale area, and communicate the benefits well enough to make people want to drive from all over Baltimore County to visit Storyville. Another challenge was to communicate the benefits of Storyville while it was still just a concept.

Prior to construction, we conducted significant research which we used as a basis for our initial communications plan. We emphasized to the potential supporters that students who are competent readers, as measured by their performance on reading tests, are more likely to perform well in other subjects, such as math and science.^{1,2} Reading achievement also predicts one's likelihood of graduating from high school and attending college.³ We also emphasized the fact that reading skills can influence students' well-being as adults. For instance, illiterate adults find it difficult to function in society, as many basic decision-making skills require reading proficiency.⁴ Additionally, strong reading skills protect against unemployment in early adulthood.⁵ Research has confirmed that performance on adult literacy tests helps to explain differences in wages.⁶ Further, adults with limited reading abilities are likely to pass these limitations on to their children.⁷ To supplement the research, we used artist renderings of what Storyville would look like to help create a visual. Once construction was underway, and after Storyville was completed our biggest communications needs were explaining the intended Storyville users and convincing people to visit Rosedale to experience Storyville.

¹Jordan, W.J., & Nettles, S.M. (1999). *How Students Invest Their Time Out of School: Effects on School Engagement, Perceptions of Life Chances, and Achievement*. Report No. 29. Washington, D.C.: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk. <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report29.pdf>

²Carline, Linda, and Carline, Douglas. (2004). "The Interaction of Reading Skills and Science Content Knowledge When Teaching Struggling Secondary Students." *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 20: 203-218.

³Ludwig, J. (1999). "Information and Inner City Educational Attainment." *Economics of Education Review*, 18, 17-30; Zaff, J.F., Moore, K.A., Papillo, A.R., & Williams, S. (2003). Implications of extracurricular activity participation during adolescence on positive outcomes. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 18(06).

⁴Kirsch, I., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L. & Kolstad, A. (1993). *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. [On-line]. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93275.pdf>; Humboldt Literacy Project. N.D. *Fast Facts on Literacy*. Eureka, CA. Author. [On-line]. Available: http://www.eurekawebs.com/humlit/fast_facts.htm

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PLANNING

While Storyville is located on the east side of Baltimore County, it is designed for all residents of Baltimore County and beyond. With this in mind, a goal was established to develop a marketing plan that would reach wide-spread audience to include potential Storyville visitors and potential Storyville funders as well as community partners who could help us spread the word about Storyville. Our community partners included the Baltimore County Executive's Office, the Maryland State Department of Education, and Baltimore County Public Schools.

COMMUNICATION GOALS

- Introduce concept of Storyville to Baltimore County residents and the surrounding region.
- Provide opportunities for community partners/funders to get an up close and personal look at Storyville and understand what it is.
- Provide opportunity for community partners/funders to play a role in the promotion of Storyville.
- Continue to promote Storyville to regular and potential visitors after initial opening excitement wanes.
- Because Storyville is a new concept, promote Storyville to internal audiences so they can explain concept to general public and promote Storyville in their communities.
- Generate visitors to Storyville who are actively engaged in the activities and materials provided.

MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

- Raise \$700,000 to complete the project.
- Increase circulation at and visits to the Rosedale Library.
- Generate media coverage of Storyville before opening, at opening, and after opening to keep Storyville in the public eye.
- Create a website promoting and explaining Storyville that records at least 50,000 hits from at least 6,000 unique visitors in Storyville's first six months of operation.
- Share Storyville information with the library world through national and local publications, presentations, and events.
- Record at least 25,000 visits to Storyville in its first year of operation.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

In developing the campaign for Storyville, we focused on press coverage, internal communications, external communications, special events, and electronic communications.

Promotion of Storyville was accomplished with a variety of media including a dedicated Storyville web address with links on the library home page, a sneak preview event for donors and other VIPs, an official ribbon-cutting event with the Baltimore County Executive as a master of ceremonies, printed brochures, newsletter and newspaper features, and television news coverage. After the initial publicity generated by Storyville's opening, we planned to execute events that kept Storyville in the public eye.

Increasing understanding of what Storyville was and who should be visiting Storyville was the focus of every promotion effort.

BUDGET

<u>Cost Description</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Source of Funds</u>
Construction and implementation of Storyville	\$700,000	Foundation for Baltimore County Public Library
Storyville promotion	\$ 4,000	Foundation for BCPL and BCPL Marketing Department

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IMPLEMENTATION

After months of planning, Storyville was designed by the architectural firm of James Bradberry and Associates, constructed by Lynch Exhibits, and built with donations to BCPL's foundation from private sources, individual and state funds, and a bond bill grant for \$250,000. Acquisition of materials began when construction began. Storyville took four months to complete. Each of the seven themed areas provides age-appropriate books, materials and activities that promote language and literacy, as well as other vital school readiness skills. Parent resource materials and themed take-home kits are available for checkout. From the outset, communication strategies focused on conveying the purpose of Storyville to potential users and supporters.

Because Storyville was such a unique concept, it was decided to brand it separately from the library. We wanted to let people know that Storyville was a destination in itself. The design of a unique Storyville logo was paramount in sending this message.

PRESS COVERAGE

Press coverage was obtained through news releases by BCPL and partner organizations as well as through personal phone calls to reporters. The phone calls were particularly effective in gaining publicity prior to construction and after the initial publicity from opening began to wane. To date, publicity efforts generated numerous stories in local newspapers and spots on local news coverage, a feature story in the June/July edition of *American Libraries*, and a feature story in the upcoming issue of *Children and Libraries*. A Storyville visit by Maryland's first lady, Katie O'Malley, and her son generated renewed media coverage several weeks after Storyville opened. A joint press conference by Maryland's Governor and the Baltimore County Executive was held at Storyville several months after the opening, again generating renewed media interest. When Storyville recorded its 50,000th visitor – after being open only seven months – we publicized this milestone. Additionally, Storyville was honored by local newspaper *The Daily Record* as one of 25 “innovators of the year.”

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Internal communications played a key role in meeting our goal to use BCPL staff as promoters of Storyville. In addition to featuring Storyville in the employee newsletter, monthly reports, available to all staff, included detailed updates on Storyville. These served well to educate staff about ever changing challenges and successes in operating Storyville, as well as sharing customer reactions to this unique service.

External communications were integral in spreading the word about what Storyville is and for whom it is designed. We developed several printed materials to explain Storyville, including a small handout requested by library staff so they could easily carry them and distribute them in person to parents and caregivers they encounter in the community. Another external communication included feature stories in the BCPL Calendar of Events – which is distributed to over 25,000 people. External communications were also issued by local and state-wide government officials.

SPECIAL EVENTS AND PRESENTATIONS

Prior to its opening, Storyville was featured at the annual gala hosted by the Foundation for BCPL with displays and informational packets. After opening, special events allowed us to show Storyville instead of explaining it. As a new concept, it was important to have people visit to fully understand what Storyville encompassed. We hosted several small- and large-scale events geared toward different audiences. A Sneak Preview for donors and local and state-wide VIPs strengthened relationships and allowed for exploration of Storyville for those who made it possible. An official ribbon cutting showed Storyville in action to the media and the general public. Visitors left the sneak preview and the ribbon cutting with a Storyville mug to further spread the word and remind people about Storyville. Smaller events were also held on-site that were geared toward staff of local schools and day care centers as well as staff members of other library systems. In addition, a presentation about Storyville was made by at the Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators. Opportunities to present at larger conferences are currently being explored.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

Electronic communications allowed us to reach an audience that is geared toward an online/electronic experience. With this outreach, we hoped to reach people who do not receive library print publications, but are or could be library customers. Current customers were targeted with a link to the Storyville web page on BCPL's home page. Potential customers were targeted with a feature in the Baltimore County Executive's e-newsletter and an online video created by the Baltimore County Executive's office. Additionally, a local news morning show broadcast live from Storyville, reaching current and potential customers via the television airwaves. Storyville was also featured on the local cable company's county government channel and on several local blogs geared toward mothers and children.

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EVALUATION

Storyville was so well received that we recorded our 50,000th Storyville visit in Storyville's after just eight months of operation. We had initially hoped to record 25,000 visits in the first year. Interest in Storyville remains high and the venue remains a popular Baltimore County destination for residents and non-residents.

- In its first six months of operation, Storyville recorded over 35,000 visits. In its first eight months of operation, Storyville recorded 50,000 visitors.
- With an initial goal of 25,000 visitors in its first year of operation, we exceeded that goal when the 50,000th visit was recorded after seven months in operation.
- A 21.5 % increase in borrowing of library materials for young children occurred since Storyville opened, compared to the same period last year
- During the first six months of Storyville's operation, the Rosedale Library experienced an increase in circulation of over 2,000 items compared to the same time period one year prior.
- The Rosedale Library experienced a 26% increase in door count during Storyville's first six months of operation as compared to the same time period one year prior.
- There was an 10.9% increase in traffic to the library website during Storyville's first six months of operation.
- In its first six months of operation, there were 258,162 hits by 10,246 unique visitors to the dedicated Storyville website.
- Visitors have come from more than 100 different zip codes to visit Storyville.

An added benefit to the Storyville project was the opportunity to strengthen the library's relationship with local and state legislators. Their support of the project, and their visits to Storyville upon its completion, raised their own awareness of the library and Storyville as well as the public's awareness as a result of media coverage of their visits.

Challenges faced by staff when Storyville first opened included explaining to parents and caregivers that they should be actively involved in the learning play of their children as Storyville is an interactive learning center, not a playground. Some parents were upset that the Storyville age limit precluded them from bringing their older children into the town. We made an effort to emphasize these points in later media coverage and print materials, as well as on the Storyville website and noticed a significant decrease in these situations.

We feel strongly that the library plays an important role in helping children enter school ready to learn. Storyville is serving as a fun way for children and caregivers to develop and enhance school readiness skills. It has proven to be so successful that the Baltimore County Executive has included funding in his budget to plan for and create a Storyville on the west side of Baltimore County. (The current Storyville is on the east side of Baltimore County and was funded mainly by funds privately raised by the Foundation for Baltimore County Public Library.) We look forward to hosting tens of thousands more visits in each future year, and are preparing to open another Storyville on the opposite side of the county to better serve our communities.