

LIBRARY OF THE 20 YEAR 00

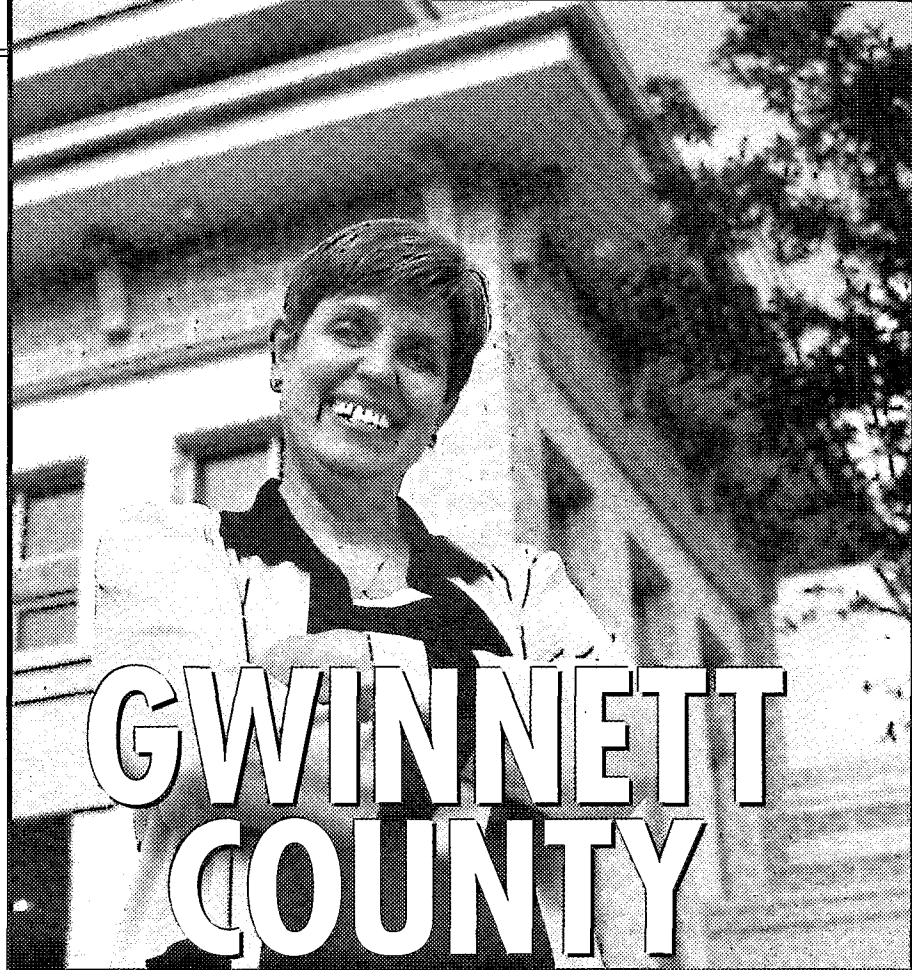
By Evan St. Lifer

PERHAPS NO library in the country tends to the needs of its constituents more consistently and meticulously than the Gwinnett County Public Library (GCPL). The library staff's unwavering service mentality coupled with its ability to thrive in the face of two major controversies that might have altogether fractured other systems, are two of the main reasons why GCPL is the 2000 *Library Journal*/Gale Group Library of the Year.

In a manner similar to county namesake Button Gwinnett, GCPL has been able to prosper amid intense political acrimony and despite a number of fierce critics. An Englishman, Gwinnett settled in Georgia in 1765 at the age of 30. He tried his hand as a farmer but after a short time found his calling in politics. His rise to power culminated in his election to the Continental Congress and subsequent signing of the Declaration of Independence. The library's similarities with Gwinnett end there: While GCPL's ideological battles have made it a stronger, more versatile system, Button Gwinnett's failure to learn from the political tumult he often initiated brought an abrupt end to his life at age 42 in a gun duel with a bitter rival.

Both of the library's penultimate tests, a scathing two-year battle with the

Evan St. Lifer is Executive Editor, *LJ*. Thanks to the following library leaders who generously volunteered their time to help the *LJ* editors select this year's Library of the Year: **Florence Simkins Brown**, Director, North Miami Beach Public Library, FL, cochair NCAAL, 2000 and 2002; **Karyle Butcher**, University Librarian & Associate Provost for Information Services, The Valley Library, Oregon State University, 1999 Library of the Year; **Gary Strong**, Director, Queens Borough Public Library, NY; and **Dedria Bryfonski**, President, Library Education Division, Gale Group



PUBLIC LIBRARY

LAWRENCEVILLE, GA

conservative right over who would lay claim to the library's soul—its book collection—and the unsettling and logistically challenging division of the regional library into three separate library districts, overlapped during a period spanning 1995–98. However, its intellectual freedom battles and system reorganization should not obfuscate the strength of GCPL and its worthiness as Library of the Year for 2000. Few peers can match GCPL's service-at-any-cost commitment to reach deep into its communities to tend to the recreational reading, information, and education needs of its patron base.

Modest budget, wealth of programs

GCPL Director Jo Ann Pinder and staff have accomplished the feat of offering a stunning array of programs targeting several cross-sections of citizenry, with a modest per capita funding figure of \$24.25—still nearly \$10 above the state average—and an annual FY00

budget of roughly \$13 million. They blanketed one of Gwinnett's fastest growing library segments, children, with more than 1000 programs in FY99. GCPL's poetry celebrations and reading programs drew nearly 37,000 kids to the library's nine branches. Other innovative programs include an online workshop to introduce senior citizens to Internet resources and technology and an initiative to guide collegebound high school seniors to web-based resources for college preparatory information on financial aid and admissions testing.

GCPL also admirably fulfills its role as the community's intellectual center both at its branches and in an outreach capacity, offering programs on volunteerism, working with a local healthcare provider to foster breast cancer awareness and provide materials on the subject, and promoting literature to preschool-aged children by dispensing storytime kits and offering training to area child care centers.



Gwinnett County's winning smiles: A beaming Jo Ann Pinder (left photo) stands outside the Collins Hill Branch. Top: The administrative team. Seated (l.-r.): Lisa Williams, Tracy Arner. 2d row (l.-r.): Karen Harris, Sue Calbreath, Mabel Anne Kincheloe, Jo Ann Pinder, Cindy Murphy, Donna Pollet. Back row (l.-r.): Alan Harkness, Elleene Morgan, Scott Bramblett, Ed McCabe. Bottom: Bramblett confers with Information Specialist Erin Bowker at the Collins Hill OPAC area.



Sunday hours coming

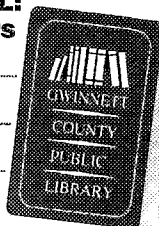
GCPL Director Pinder says she knew, and suspects the staff knew as well, that providing Sunday hours was an inevitability. After all, it was the number one request among customers. Although Pinder acknowledges that the notion of working Sundays, "isn't popular with [the staff] right now," she says flatly that if they don't want to work Sundays, "then they need to find a place to work where the schedule will work better for them. I admire the people who leave if it's not working for them, rather than the ones who stay and complain."

Besides the lack of appeal among library staff, most libraries don't initiate Sunday service because they simply can't afford it. However, instead of going to the board and asking for more money, Pinder and her staff came up with creative ways to reallocate some money from the materials budget, where they sought to find some redundancies between print and electronic resources. They took the money—a one-time-only cost of \$200,000 for self-checkout machines and \$187,000 in staff costs annually—in order to make Sunday service a reality beginning in September.

Implementing Sunday service is infinitely easier to do in Georgia, a right-to-work state where unions aren't as formidable in public institutions. "I'm not running a place where people work, I'm running a public library," says Pinder, somewhat imperiously. "I hope people who work here have a good experience and that I can provide them with what they need to do their job. But the reason

Gwinnett County PL: Behind the Numbers

Number of branches:	9
Total budget (FY00):	\$13,110,000
Per capita funding (FY00):	\$24.25
Total items checked out (FY99):	5,158,149
Proportion of registered borrowers to general population:	32%
Children's programs (FY99):	1,021
Average number of items borrowed per cardholder (annually):	30
Books:	682,598
Electronic databases:	109
Periodical/newspaper subscriptions:	2,009
AV materials:	101,949
Net-accessible workstations:	167



we are here is to serve the public."

As resolute as Pinder sounds, the library nevertheless has gone to great lengths to implement staff initiatives in both training and management to cultivate staff leadership and decision-making ability, aspects of public librarianship not often experienced below the administrative level. This notion of shared leadership is practiced across the GCPL system, according to branch manager Whitney Halcomb, and exemplified by working groups referred to by staffers as "PATs," process action teams. Halcomb says it is not unusual for 50 PATs, comprised of staffers from differing levels of the library's strata, to work on tackling distinct problems. "We are allowing more of the front-line staff to give us their input and recommendations," explains Halcomb. "As a staff member working on a PAT, it gives you a window outside your job to other parts of the organization that may be a little different or new to you."

Eye on present, vision of future

Perhaps most impressive about GCPL is not just its breadth of programming but its commitment to crafting a strategic vision for the future. In an effort to remain a vital resource to the community, Pinder and staff are putting the finishing touches on an element of GCPL's strategic plan that will devote two percent of the materials budget to the "investigation and trial of emerging formats." She explains the library will also seek to "target new user segments" with these emerging technologies. The library's vision statement, crafted in 1999, reads, "[GCPL] provides resources and services that inform, inspire, enrich and amaze—as we promote community and personal growth."

The library has laid out several standards to improve services in 2001, including expansion of library access points, mobile service to the county's underserved populations, more enhancements for children and their parents, a commitment to cutting-edge technology, additional fundraising, and increased efforts to assess employee performance.

Book troubles begin

Gwinnett's book collection troubles began in 1995, when a local chapter of the conservative group Family Friendly Libraries complained publicly that Roald Dahl's children's classic *George's Marvellous Medicine* advocated murder. The battle led several state lawmakers in 1995

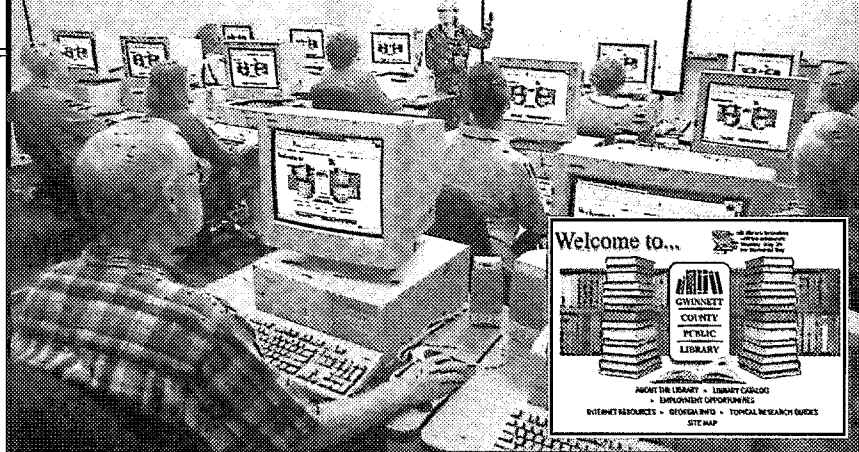
and again in 1996 to request that the library abrogate its decision-making authority over the collection in deference to a new collection of "community standards," since they claimed the library "failed to restrict" access by "minor children" to "violent or sexually explicit" materials.

Other protests followed over the next couple of years, with conservative factions questioning the library's selection of both children's and adult books, including Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries* and Miriam Stoppard's *Woman's Body*. The pressure on Pinder and her staff intensified, as the media sieged upon the salacious story. "Obviously, people were upset with us. [The collection controversy] made it difficult to do the day-to-day stuff when you're being interviewed by the media before and after every board meeting," says Pinder. Still, Pinder reasons that the library system is "much better" for it. "We were better prepared to introduce new services. Because we had to do it in the media's eye, we had to put more effort into it."

In a letter to *LJ*, Debbie Tuschall, a library board member who helped the library fight censorship efforts, writes that while the emotional toll of defending the library's position was considerable, "the assault on me was insignificant compared to the personal attacks on [Pinder] and her staff, whose professionalism, integrity, and morality were publicly questioned."

The GCPL staff bent, but it didn't break. In order to address critics' concerns that teens might inadvertently stumble upon inappropriate materials, the staff formed a Teen Fiction collection as well as a Teen Nonfiction homework center that preserved open access to the adult collection. Further, staff listened patiently to Family Friendly Libraries activists who called for the removal of the American Library's Freedom To Read statement in favor of a more localized version. Pinder and staff responded with a Free Access to Ideas statement designed to uphold the library's commitment to a diverse, unbiased collection to serve the entire community.

To this day, Pinder estimates receiving roughly one request a month to remove a book from the collection. "I don't



Senior Cyber Camp: Sue Calbreath heads a training session at the Lawrenceville branch, part of Gwinnett's program to ease seniors onto the Internet

think [the censorship attempts] are ever behind us, or behind any library," she says. "You are always eligible for the community to decide that you're not doing what it is that they want you to do. It's difficult down here when so many

of the citizens are conservative, politically and religiously."

The GCPL paradox

Pinder doesn't come from the Deep South. Her hometown is Pittsburgh, she earned her MLS from the University of Pittsburgh library school, where Tom Galvin taught her reference, and she cites two stalwarts of Maryland librarianship, Charlie Robinson and Nettie Taylor, as early influences. Despite her North Atlantic pedigree, she has spent her entire

professional career below the Mason-Dixon line, living and working in some of the country's more conservative areas. She acknowledges that neither she nor her staff could have foreseen the vituperative clashes that would occur over the book collection. Yet it is that willingness to persevere, to uphold some of librarianship's seminal intellectual freedoms, that makes the library's Internet policy so paradoxical.

The library decided to filter all of its 167 public, net-accessible computers when it debuted the Internet in July 1996.

Pinder, a Public Library Association division rep and American Library Association councilor, says the decision was not a difficult one to make. "We knew that we had to filter Internet access or the second day it was offered [without a filter] we would have had to shut it down, or we'd have been on the front page of the paper, or the board

would not have approved the policy. And we wanted so much for our public to have Internet access that filtering it wasn't a big deal," explains Pinder, who instead had her staff focus on "making this tool the best it can be."

In their zeal to respond to the best interests and needs of the community—the singular quality that impressed so many of the *LJ*/Gale Group LOY judges—Pinder and her staff made the decision to forgo a potentially more damaging, venomous intellectual freedom battle over open access to the net. Why the turnabout on the electronic side? "Maybe we were drained, I don't know," admits Pinder, about the library's decision.

Further, Pinder sees her handling of the Internet less as a capitulation to the community's religious right and more as a collection management issue. "I wouldn't buy a bunch of books and have a tractor trailer dump them in a heap," says Pinder. "We didn't do that with the Internet either. We've tried to provide information navigation for the Internet."

Pinder has chosen for GCPL a well-worn path of service delivery over doctrine. "I think when you scratch underneath [the surface] of a lot of us librarians, you realize that in order to serve our public we've got to make compromises. And a filter is a compromise we must make," says a candid Pinder. "I would love to be a purist. There is what we believe as professionals and what we believe is best for running our institutions, and sometimes those things are not the same." Pinder says neither she nor any GCPL staffer has fielded a complaint from a patron about being denied access to a blocked site. (See sidebar, above, for more on GCPL's filtering rationale.) Staff have not expressed dissatisfaction over the policy either, according to Pinder.

The big split

At the same time the library and its collection were being attacked, the staff

GCPL Handles Net Access the Gray Way

Part of the challenge of running a public library, according to GCPL Library Director Jo Ann Pinder, is that the issues at hand are rarely black and white but various striations of gray. *LJ* Executive Editor Evan St. Lifer sought to gain some additional insight from Pinder into how a library with an unparalleled service mentality and commitment to intellectual freedom arrived at a policy to filter all of its public, net-accessible workstations.

You've had every public terminal in GCPL filtered since Day One. How did you arrive at that decision? Was there any staff debate over it?

We knew we were going to offer net access as of July 1, 1996. In the middle of a [protracted] intellectual freedom fight over the collection, the staff realized there was no way we could offer Internet access without a fight.

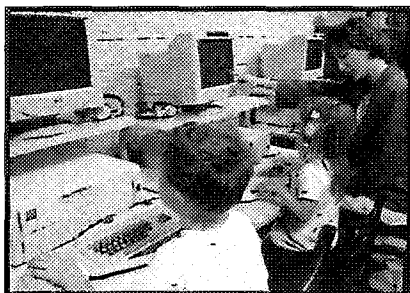
You're an ALA Councilor and have been heavily involved in ALA. What would you say to your colleagues about your decision to filter all your net terminals?

I'm saying here in Georgia, a lot of communities are very conservative about their net access being filtered. As the library director here, I made a de-

cision to filter the net. I probably would not have made that same decision in a different community, but it's all about serving your local community and about being a part of your local community.

Doesn't the heavy criticism of filters and their shortcomings eat at you from an intellectual freedom point of view given how long and hard you have fought to keep certain books in the GCPL collection?

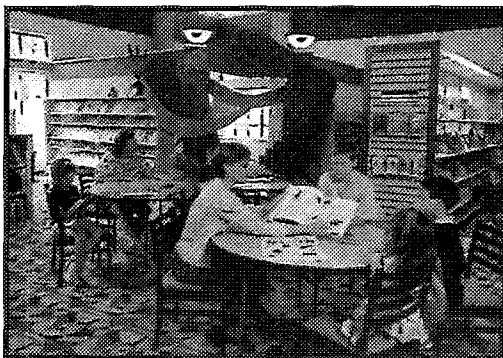
I deal every single day with serving my community, and while I don't compromise my ideals, I make sure that if I



KiddieLAN: Tracy Arner assists Jake Inderrieden (l.) and Nicole Stieglitz on specially equipped children's computers

happen to lose the battle, I will still win the war. I will not put in jeopardy the library that serves the citizens of this

After the library's growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Pinder said it became evident that Gwinnett, Forsyth, and Dawson would at some point have to dissolve their 40-year union to better serve



Collins Hill Kiddies: Donna Pollet (center) revs kids up for Gwinnett's Summer Reading Club

their respective counties. Describing the 1996 breakup of the Gwinnett-Forsyth system as an "amicable divorce," Pinder reasons that libraries in both counties were being adversely affected by their re-

community. It's like situational ethics: you have to decide at what point you make decisions that you don't feel comfortable making.

It sounds like you're saying that if you had offered open access to the net, library service in Gwinnett County would have been imperiled.

We get 85 percent of our funding from people who are elected. We are a Republican county. The Christian Coalition is very strong here. Ralph Reed lives in Gwinnett County. The people who are elected take their philosophy from the people who elected them. And in this county, the people want their Internet filtered.

Are you aware of the 1998 court decision in which a judge ruled the policy of the Loudoun County PL, VA, to filter net access regardless of age unconstitutional?

Yes, and I disagree. The judge, at least the way I interpreted it, ruled that the Internet was an acquisition and the minute you turned it on, you acquired it as a whole, and that blocking it was akin to removal. GCPL views the net as all of the materials that are available to us to select or deselect. What we try to do is acquire and catalog the sites based on our customers' materials needs and wants.

had been preparing for months for the apportioning of the Gwinnett-Forsyth County system into three constituent parts. During the 1980s, Gwinnett County was one of the nation's fastest-growing areas, and it continues a steady expansion, albeit at a slower rate. Now, Forsyth County enjoys that boom town distinction.

Gwinnett and Forsyth had come together in 1956, before being joined by Dawson County two years later, leading to the creation of the Lake Lanier Regional Library System. A referendum in 1986 gave the library system the funding it needed to transform itself from a series of ramshackle storefronts to a collection of full-service branches. Forsyth Library Director Jon McDaniel, then working at GCPL as the staff liaison to the contractors, says the library staff actually designed the floor plans themselves and "had a lot of control" over the interior design of the branches.

gional status. "Forsyth was growing incredibly and needed to be split off, and Dawson needed to join another regional system," she says. "The staff worked very hard to ensure Forsyth had everything it needed to stand alone." Dawson was the first to secede, joining the Chesapeake Regional Library System in 1994.

Both Pinder and McDaniel acknowledge that GCPL's book collection wars may have expedited the Gwynnett-Forsyth split. Now Pinder and the GCPL staff had to deal with the vicissitudes of not one library system but two: Pinder and staff had to establish Gwinnett's identity while dealing with the challenges of getting Forsyth on its feet, meaning two infrastructures replete with mission statements, budgets, policies, etc. McDaniel said Pinder handled the affair with adroitness and professionalism. "If you were going to have to split up of a library system, this is how you do it properly," he said. "Now Gwinnett County is the model that everyone in Georgia patterns themselves after." ■

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a red diamond at the top, followed by a yellow-to-white gradient bar.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Gwinnett County Public Library, Lawrenceville, GA
SOURCE: Library Journal 125 no11 Je 15 2000
WN: 0016701872010

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.cahners.com/>.

Copyright 1982-2002 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.