

EDUCATION

# Libraries embrace changing role



Above, Maria Bonfim and Pablo Palacio use the scanning station at the Norwalk Public Library on Friday. At left, Meredith Coleman and the City Winds Trio teach children, including, from left, 3-year-old Sofia Cueto, 4-year-old Sofia Vasquez, 5-year-old Siya Malaya and 9-year-old Dimitri Iosifidis, about music and national anthems from around the world during the Ready Set Go program.



Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

## Kids learn music and national anthems from around the world

By Kaitlyn Krasselt

NORWALK — Mary Ann MacLachlan considers herself a bit of a “library rat.” When she’s not working or

taking classes, the Norwalk woman said she often visits libraries in communities along Connecticut’s Gold Coast, depending where her errands take her.

“I like the atmosphere of a library, the quiet, the being around other people who like reading,” MacLachlan said. “It’s a gathering place, and I find it conducive to deep concentration. I just love the community feel.”

MacLachlan isn’t the only one who feels at home in the library. In a new report re-

leased by the Norwalk Public Library, library visits were up 30 percent in fiscal year 2016 across Norwalk’s main branch and the South Norwalk branch, despite active library card usage declining 14 percent and public computer sessions declining 12 percent in the same period.

Christine Bradley, executive director of the Norwalk Library, attributes the increase in visitors to an increase in library programming for all ages.

“The libraries are increasingly becoming places where people visit rather than just

*See Library on A5*

## LIBRARY

From page A1

run in, check out an item and leave,” Bradley said. “It’s really something to think about as we go forward, to be flexible with space. I think part of it goes along with this switch from checking out materials to using other services that the library provides. You don’t need a library card to attend programs at the library.”

Adult program attendance across Norwalk’s two library branches is up 29 percent, thanks in large part to a substantial increase in adult programming. The library recently hired a full-time programming coordinator, and has added adult programming that includes author visits, book clubs, business workshops and health and fitness programming.

Bradley said the fitness programming, which includes weekly yoga, Zumba, walk aerobics and more, has been particularly popular since the Norwalk YMCA closed in 2012.

The Norwalk data is in line with library trends across the state which show Connecticut’s libraries are increasing their focus on programs for the public, while traditional library services like book-loaning and computer use either have declined or held steady

Sunday, July 24, 2016 | The Hour | A5



Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Leslie Kerr, right, leads Walk Areobics with Leslie Kerr at the Norwalk Public Library Main Branch on Thursday. The library is ramping up programming in an effort to curb declining membership.

since the mid-2000s, according to the Connecticut State Library.

Statewide, library memberships are down more than 25 percent since the mid-2000s, but the number of programs offered by libraries has nearly doubled since 2001. Additionally, 89 percent of towns have seen an increase in the number of programs put on by their libraries since 2001, and 74 percent of towns have seen an increase in per-capita attendance during that time.

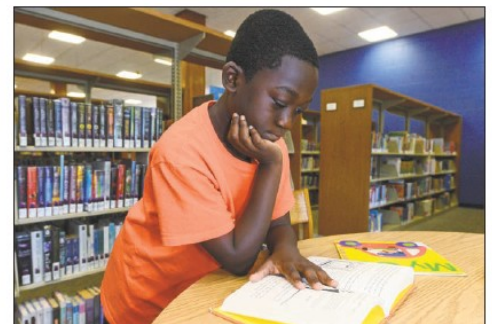
The number of library

memberships statewide peaked at 2 million in 2008 and has since decreased to about 1.4 million in 2015 — a 25 percent decline in seven years — according to the state library.

Bradley, who has been a librarian for nearly four decades and the Norwalk director for seven years, said she has seen a dramatic change in the way communities view and utilize library services. Gone are the days when libraries were only a source for information.

“I worked at the Boston

Public Library, and at that time I remember it was a significant building with a grand staircase in the front, and that was the attitude, that you may be able to come up this stairway and achieve knowledge and be uplifted,” Bradley said. “And I think now, as we have changed the past couple of generations, we don’t have to go up the steps anymore and I think the library is an integral part of the community. Just as the arts commission, social services agencies and others respond to the needs of the



Nine-year-old Joseph Jakpasu reads “Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Long Haul” at the Norwalk Public Library Main Branch.

community and provide services in their particular area of expertise, so do we, and it makes for a much better community. We try to be a part of the community.”

In addition to expanded programming, libraries have begun offering their space for more public use, opening up the library for public art installations and performances by local musicians to increase community involvement, and adding high speed wireless internet, and opening up conference rooms — and marketing them — for reservations have all helped increased library visits. Bradley said the library is even looking into offering WiFi hotspots for checkout, a service the Danbury Public Library already offers.

“People could check it out

when they’re going on vacation or for whatever they need,” Bradley said. “That’s a service we’d really like to be able to provide.”

As a library enthusiast, MacLachlan said the evolving view of public libraries is positive for the community and library users who are constantly inundated with media from all directions.

“I definitely think it’s an important trend because as it becomes harder for books to be relevant — today there is so much competition for the mind — it’s good to have spaces like this that offer the traditional services and more programs,” MacLachlan said. “It’s hard to beat theater of the mind.”

KKrasselt@scni.com; 203-354-1021; @kaitlynkrasselt