How we make time to learn and why it matters for all of Oak Park.

As Library Assistant Hanzi Deschermeier tells it, a 7-year-old boy swept through the Dole Branch Library one day this fall, scouring every nook and cranny. With Deschermeier’s help, he netted a World Book encyclopedia, two presidential biographies, and half a dozen National Geographic for Kids books. As the boy was leaving with his father, Deschermeier heard him say: “I just want to learn everything!”

As your public library, we couldn’t be more excited to hear such a thing. Your learning is our mission, and engaging you through exceptional customer experiences is our goal. But to realize that mission and achieve that goal, we know we need to always be learning as well.

“Lifelong learning is at the heart of the library’s mission,” says Oak Park Public Library Board of Trustees President Matt Baron. “So it’s not only fitting, but imperative, that staff engage in continued learning experiences themselves. You can’t give what you don’t have, so the more knowledge and insight we gain, individually and collectively across all departments and among elected officials, the more we can offer to the community.”

Assistant Director Jim Madigan says that, over the years, the board of trustees has consistently approved library budgets that include money for staff training and continuing education. The budget for 2016, when learning remains one of the library’s three strategic priorities for both patrons and staff, supports that commitment.

In return, Staff Learning Coordinator Sharon Grimm says that library staff are equipped to provide excellent customer experiences for patrons.

“We need to be stewards of our community’s resources,” she says. “Good stewardship means ensuring library staff are fully prepared for and engaged in the work they do for and with our community.”

This December, all library staff gathered together to focus on learning with and from each other. The intention? A better library for all of Oak Park.
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What are we learning?

Behind the scenes, staff learn from both outside specialists and each other through the library’s long-running Learn While You Earn program, which turned 10 last year. The program covers relevant topics identified by library leadership and Grimm. Sessions give staff access to experts from organizations such as the American Library Association, the Public Library Association, the American Management Association, and Reaching Across Illinois Library Systems (RAILS), a regional library consortium. Local speakers from the Village of Oak Park, University of Illinois at Chicago, and community social service agencies also present on timely and relevant community topics, all focused on building staff skills in technical, operational, and social-emotional areas.

Why is that learning important?

“A library as an institution is often meant as a place of higher, deeper learning,” Grimm says. “We could call the Learn While You Earn program a job training program, and people would understand that. But we wanted to go a bit deeper and support development skills that go beyond day-to-day job duties.”

Another way staff learn behind the scenes is through groups called Innovation Spaces. Borrowed from the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, this method brings staff together to discuss the process and implications of what they’re learning. Children’s Librarian Anne Bensfield is one of five formally trained Harwood practitioners leading Innovation Space meetings among library staff. “Among other things,” she says, “it’s a dedicated time and space in which we can reflect. It builds relationships and improves communication.” Bensfield and others also hosted Innovation Spaces last year with external community groups including Success of All Youth, Oak Park Elementary School District 97, and the Literacy Volunteers of Western Cook County.

What can we carry forward?

More Innovation Space sessions, both inside and outside the library, are planned for 2016—the third year in which learning, engagement, and stewardship remain strategic priorities at the library.

New staff learning programs for project management, diversity and inclusion, and digital learning also are being developed.

Deschermeier, the library assistant who helped that 7-year-old learner at Dole Branch this fall—the one who wanted to learn everything—calls the library’s organizational approach to staff learning “one of our most identifiably positive aspects.”

We know we have a lot to learn from you! Please tell us about your experience at the library. We also always welcome your opinions and suggestions through our open-ended customer survey. Take it anytime at oppl.org/experience.

We’re excited to debut The Storyline, a new quarterly library publication that connects its readers with people, places, and possibilities. Stop in at any Oak Park Public Library location and pick up your copy today. View it online at oppl.org/news.