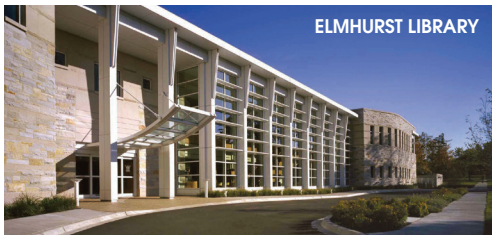




# TOP SHELF

*The best in local libraries: Opening the book into a world of distinctive collections, imaginative children’s programs and a trove of community resources*



What’s happening at libraries today is about as broad and diverse as, well, what is found between 000 and 999 of the Dewey Decimal System. Recently, two teenage friends excitedly recorded a rap song at Elmhurst Library. Nervous rookie entrepreneurs took part in a workshop at Naperville Library. A perplexed patron sat down for a one-on-one session with a staffer at Downers Grove Library to learn more about his digital devices. A competitor from “The Shark Tank” described her successful wooing of Mark Cuban at Brookfield Library; aspiring comedians attended an improv workshop at Oak Park Library. And a bird lover rented a pair of binoculars from the Gail Borden Library in Elgin for his expedition to the Fox River.

By Jay Copp

Libraries still host shelves of books, but they’ve transformed into something much more. This is where the tools and toys of the digital age, the need to pay bills, the impulse for self-growth and the deep-seated desire to connect with others all intersect.

“Libraries are a community center, a gathering space,” says Carole Medal, executive director of the Gail Borden Library in Elgin. “There is such a vibrancy to our library. When I was a child and went to our library (in Mount Prospect), there was a lot of shushing going on. You won’t get that here.”

Libraries are so different today that they look different. The first display cases a visitor sees upon entering Naperville Library are rows of DVDs, CDs and audio books. Beyond them, before you can disappear into the stacks of books, are tables with computers, scanners and printers. Lining the main room are study rooms for quieter concentration or, just as likely, social interaction. “The design of libraries used to be based on linear-foot of shelving. Now the design is about social space,” says Medal.

Yet libraries have not changed so much as they have evolved. “Books are central to a library’s identity. But we’re so much more than shelves of books,” says Julie Rothenfluh, executive director of the Naperville Library. “We’re still all about access — to knowledge, information and entertainment. You can do a lot more than just check out a book.”

The tables of people on computers represent the tip of an electronic iceberg. Many libraries offer access to Hoopla and its thousands of movies, TV shows and CDs and to learning sites such as Lynda.com, which offers more than 3,000 online courses. Libraries also offer workshops so patrons can master digital technology and dedicate staff to working one-on-one with patrons befuddled by the technology.

The good news is that thanks to reciprocal borrowing privileges and inter-library loans a person with a library card can take advantage of other libraries’ books, DVDs, CDs, Hoopla and online learning. With a few exceptions, usually where space is limited, a resident from one suburb also can attend the workshops and presentations or check out the digital devices and other non-print items of another library.

Rating services assess libraries by metrics such as visits per capita and items checked out per capita. Flush with a substantial tax base and an educated populace that demands and supports first-rate public services, the western suburbs abound with highly rated libraries. Here is a rundown, a tip of Dr. Seuss’ cat’s hat, to the best and most unusual features of our local libraries.

**Best Library (Tie): Elmhurst/Naperville**

Prowling the stacks never gets old for bibliophiles. But at Elmhurst Library, keenly steeped in an ethos of community engagement, roaming the floor — especially the second floor — is a literary and learning adventure. So much catches the eye and captivates the mind. The large Spotlight Shelves on music, crafts, cooking, interior design, investments, social issues and other topics display books

with covers facing outward, drawing in browsers. Also enticing are the abundance of books in its Travel Center, the theme collections such as the Gratitude Table (The Gratitude Diaries is one title), the Diverse Lives and Local Authors displays, and “pop-up” displays, such as ones devoted to Jim Nabors and David Cassidy (these tables include videos and books related to the recently deceased celebrities). Equally appealing is the Library of

Extraordinary Things, with displays cases relating to ice cream makers, knitting needles, waffle irons and other household items that can be borrowed.

The library brilliantly promotes its multitude of events, workshops, and clubs through wall displays that contain small, attractive take-home information cards. Patrons won’t forget the time and date of the Photoshop Basics class, the Star Wars Trivia Night or the Genealogy Club meeting.

A growing trend, Elmhurst has a well-stocked Makery, a semi-industrial work space with a router to create items from wood, metal and plastic; a laser cutter; 3D printers; embroidery and sewing machines and more. Patrons have created dollhouse furniture, signs with family or company names and Christmas cards.

Elmhurst earns extra kudos for creating a welcoming space. A staff person near the



Photo courtesy of Hinsdale Public Library





Photo courtesy of Theosophical Society of America

### East Meets West at this Unusual Wheaton Library

In addition to its many wonderful public libraries, the western suburbs is home to a number of excellent college and independent libraries. One of the most unusual is the Henry S. Olcott Memorial Library in Wheaton, located in the headquarters of the Theosophical Society of America. Designed in collegiate-gothic style by Chicago-based architect Irving Kane Pond and built in 1927, the three-story building, of which the rich wood-paneled library is the centerpiece, also houses offices, classrooms, an auditorium and a meditation room.

This unique library brings together the religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions of the East and West, emphasizing the ancient wisdom of theosophy. The collection of more than 20,000 books, periodicals and video and audio recordings is one of the finest in the country, covering topics ranging from Eastern philosophy and comparative religion to mysticism, mythology, meditation, healing, astrology and yoga.

door is quick to ask if help is needed. Staff in general are genial: on this day a children’s librarian ushers in youngsters to an event with a cheerful sing-songy “Tickets, may I have your tickets?” and greets a young boy wearing the Gotham crime fighter’s shirt with a hearty “Well, hello, Mr. Batman.”

The library does the little things — those things found at libraries — right. The most current display case at the front entrance features Flea Market Finds: a 1912 bank ledger from Oak Park that shows deposits from a young Ernest Hemingway, a well-worn booklet detailing Chicago police regulations

in 1924 and a winsome 1968 Bobby Kennedy campaign poster.

Huddled with her two preschoolers in the children’s section of the main branch of the Naperville Library, Ying Timmermann is unequivocal about her regard for her hometown library. “It’s a big factor in why we live here,” she says. She’s hardly alone in her local library love. The three branches tally nearly 1.5 million visitors annually and 4.2 million items checked-out. Their 2,500 programs draw more than 100,000 people.

Year after year, Naperville Library has been acclaimed as the nation’s top library by Hennen’s American Public Library

Ratings. The Library Journal Index, now the primary rating service, more recently designated the Naperville Library as a five-star library, one of only six in Illinois — Elmhurst, Oak Park, Arlington Heights, Skokie and Pembroke were the others.

Naperville Library does about everything a library does and does it well. It has 113,000 movies and video games. It offers more than 44,000 e-books and audio books through OverDrive. Google has nothing on this library: its reference librarians answered more than 150,000 queries last year.

Epitomizing Naperville’s broad, creative service is its Naperlaunch, a business start-up center and co-working space that hosts frequent workshops. Entrepreneurs and small business owners learn how to start or grow their enterprises.

**Runners Up:** The Gail Borden Library in Elgin, especially for its exhibits and customer service; Oak Park Library for its family-friendly children section.

**Most Beautiful**

Built in 1930, Riverside Library is the quintessential library with a grand limestone exterior, solid oak doors, a stately interior, stained glass windows and a gorgeous view of the Des Plaines River. Don’t miss the two stone gargoyles, inspired by the ones at Notre Dame Cathedral, that guard the entrance. The library once graced the cover of American Libraries, and Oprah taped a book discussion show here.

**Runner up:** Perched on the Fox River, the Prairie-style Gail Borden Library in Elgin is a sight to behold on a winter’s evening as its extra-large windows emit brilliant sheets of light and evoke the majesty and magic of books and learning.

**The Little Library That Could**

Libraries in larger suburbs have an advantage in terms of what they can offer. Among the smaller suburbs, La Grange Park Library has it all — from a stunning atrium and playful children’s area to a friendly staff and a full slate of interesting talks and presentations. Upcoming are Cartoon Confidential on Feb. 5 by cartoonist Mark Anderson, followed by Chef Andrea Pracht giving tips on using pressure cookers a week later. This library has broad appeal: the town has a population of 13,483 and 10,027 residents have library cards.

**Best Children’s Programs**

Story time remains a staple of libraries, but given that children now grow up with a slew of habit-forming digital products, libraries have dramatically upped their game in children’s programming. They’ve embraced digital technology. Oak Park Library lets cardholders stream indie and world films through Facets Kids. Its Oak Park Code Fest in January allows children to learn about robots and coding apps.

Schaumburg’s vast e-library includes Miss Humblebee’s Academy to help young children get ready for preschool. Downers Grove Library sponsors an Our Girls Who Code Club. Naperville Library hosts exhibits of the DuPage Children’s Museum and also partners with Naper Settlement and Knoch Knolls Nature Center for hands-on activities for children. Batavia Library hosts a popular Science and Art Fair for families on January 27.

**Best Children’s Area**

Many libraries excel at making children feel at home. Oak Park stands out with its huge, colorful children’s section with an aquarium, a reading fort and kid-sized furniture. Even better are the advanced but fun learning tools available for children:



Photo courtesy of Richard and Gina Santori Public Library

the Homework Hub, a study room with computers, calculators and wipe boards; 50 Discovery Kits with activities in art, music, math, science and more; and audio books.

Thomas Ford Memorial Library in Western Springs enchants children with its 50-ft wooden train and a replica of the town’s historic water tower. Aurora not only has a big children’s space for reading and playing but also has an outdoor garden with dreamy fairy houses and ceramic fish that “swim” in a rivulet. Children can make their own art by painting with water on large rocks or by drawing with chalk on black stepping stones.

**Best Touches of Whimsy**

Like churches, libraries are among the public or semi-public spaces that are on the quieter side. But libraries are not somber or staid places. Libraries often showcase a lightness of spirit. The best example is the jaunty Cat in the Hat statue just off the parking lot of the main Naperville library. The 8-ft-tall statue was dedicated in 2007 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Dr. Seuss classic.

The North Riverside Library has a touching bronze statue of a young girl reading to her younger brother. Batavia

Library patrons cherish the library’s unofficial mascot, an egghead sculpture dressed up seasonally.

Just outside the front doors of Oak Park Library is a marvelous statue of a boy perched on a giant turtle and peering into a telescope. Apt for a town known for its writers, the glass stairwell inside is emblazoned with inspiring quotes from authors. Alas, a few years ago the library carted away its quirky Artomat, a vintage cigarette machine that dispensed small art trinkets for \$5.

**Best Reading Spots**

Riverside’s Quiet Reading Room (known as the Terrace Room until enclosed two decades ago) features a stone floor and spacious windows that reveal a wooded landscape. Or plop down on the ancient leather couch, circa 1930, that overlooks the river.

The third-floor reading area at Oak Park Library tenders views of lovely Scoville Park. The Gail Borden Library in Elgin is chock-full of miniature living rooms with plush chairs. The reading room at Thomas Ford Memorial Library in Western Springs offers a fireplace, comfortable chairs and the kind of deep,



restful quiet found only at libraries. The third floor at Aurora Public Library has a peaceful reading room with a dramatic view of downtown.

Best Movie/Music Collections

Schaumburg Township District Library has one of the largest collections of movies, music, audio books and video games, with more than 90,000 items. Naperville has a large selection of foreign films, and Hinsdale and Oak Park are notable for their collection of hard-to-find independent movies.

Best Special Collections

Hemingway grew up in Oak Park, and its library has a terrific collection on its native son, including first editions, letters and even spelling tests and high school essays. Frank Lloyd Wright lived and worked in town as well, and the library’s collection on the acclaimed architect includes photos, letters and rare books, among them his first published work, *The Wasmuth Portfolio* from 1910.

Best Upcoming Talks/Events

You can probably find an interesting talk at a library somewhere nearby practically any day of the year. Stressed out after the holidays? Downers Grove offers meditation programs on Jan. 16 and 30. Hinsdale presents Jammin’ in the Stacks with vocalist Alyssa Allgood on Jan. 19. Aurora has three intriguing talks: Death Café, a no-agenda get-together on mortality, on Jan. 25; When You Wish Upon a Star: Creating Disney World, featuring a Disney special effects expert, on Jan. 28; and From Chicago to Vietnam: A Memoir of War, by veteran and author Michael Duffy, on February 3.

True to its progressive reputation, Oak Park Library hosts Art for Social Change: Sanctuary City Postcards in January.

Participants will learn about the city’s Welcoming Village ordinance, human rights and diversity, and create postcards illustrating those topics. Lincoln portrayer Kevin Wood ambles to the Naperville Library Feb. 15 for a brown bag lunch. Superheroes and other pop cultural icons

Photo courtesy of Gail Borden Public Library



will congregate at Schaumburg for its lavish 4th Annual Comic Con on March 10.

Indian Prairie Library in Darien is known for its ambitious events. This summer it will partner again with Good Worx/Sunny Patch to plant 40 container gardens of fruits and vegetables for the library’s Prairie Patch. Students in the summer Garden Lab maintain the garden. Recent events included a Harry Potter Fest, a How-To Expo with a range of topics like carpentry, dog training and knitting and a Fiber Fest focused on crochet, knitting and spinning. In fall the library will hold a multicultural festival.

Best Exhibit

Hosted by The Gail Borden Library in Elgin beginning in March, Extreme Deep: Mission to the Abyss, a hands-on, interactive exploration of life at the bottom of the ocean, promises to be extraordinary.

The library has a history of pulling off wondrous exhibits including ones on dinosaurs, robots and space travel. Also worth seeing is Wheaton Library’s World War I exhibit from January 1 to 23, which follows a series of talks on the war that was hoped would end all wars.

Best Tech Programs

Most libraries have a wide array of digital resources and tools and will help patrons with technical issues. A few stand out. Naperville’s mobile app allows patrons to download popular books, music and magazines, access databases, view library events and even manage the check-out and renewal of their children’s materials.

The Gail Borden Library in Elgin offers Gail’s Toolkit, an online portal with 65 classes to learn about Windows, WordPress, LinkedIn, Craigslist or Pinterest or help on how to write a resume and how to find a job.

Studio 10 West at La Grange Library allows patrons to produce and edit video, audio and photos thanks to its professional-level equipment. Staff gladly walk La Grange cardholders through the basics. Elmhurst also has a first-rate Creative Studio for video and audio work.

Best Reference Librarians

The Gail Borden Library in Elgin prides itself on answering just about any question. Queries one recent day were on antique furniture, vintage cars, Edgar Allan Poe, cropping microfilm, finding books in Polish, becoming a pharmacy technician and many other topics. Patrons desperate for help are able to resolve vexing issues — when a Czech-speaking patron grappled with an identity-theft problem with her bank, a librarian used Google Translator to communicate with the woman’s daughter in London. The grateful patron brought in Czech sandwiches for the staff.

Best Public Service

Many libraries bring their books and other resources to nursing homes, homebound seniors and children at summer camp. St. Charles Library presents programs especially developed for seniors. Aurora Library uses bilingual staff who speak Spanish in its outreach to the homebound.

Other examples of the social consciousness of libraries: Schaumburg hosts naturalization ceremonies; Oak Park has employed a social worker since 2016; La Grange Park Library hosts a teen job fair; Glen Ellyn Library sells some donated books, recycles others and donates children’s books it thinks it cannot sell to nonprofit agencies.

Best Service

It’s 4 a.m., and you’re desperate for a classic tearjerker. No worries. Gail Borden has its 24/7 DVD Dispenser. Also admirable is the new policy of Oak Park not to charge overdue fines.

Best Java

Artisanal roaster Brewpoint Coffee of Elmhurst operates Lexicon Cafe inside Elmhurst Library. Order a Library Special



Photo courtesy of Oak Park Public Library. Insert: Schaumburg Public Library

such as a Bookworm Fro-ho. Munch on a decadent dessert and then, to assuage your guilt, check out a book on healthy recipes. Wheaton’s Café on the Park also sells quality coffee.

Unusual Items to Borrow

Sorry, Amazon, libraries often lend for free what is sold online. Schaumburg Library lends out toys such as Tobbles, Fractiles and strategy games. Riverside Library loans guitars, a ukulele and a telescope. The Helen Plum Memorial Library in Lombard circulates robotics. A popular offering at Western Springs is a Binge Box, four to seven themed movies. St. Charles takes an earthier approach: it offers seeds from its Seed Library.

Libraries also often circulate lap tops, DVD players, iPods, digital cameras, camcorders and even virtual reality devices. Oak Park just made available for checkout (for Oak Park cardholders) 40 new Sprint 4G mobile hot spots.

Best Art

Libraries are champions of the arts and art — just take a look at their lobbies, display cases and floor and wall decorations. Aurora is particularly enamored of artists. Its Maria Wilkinson

statue honors “the mother of Aurora,” who took care of the less fortunate in the city. Its newest art work is Heart of America, a 40-ft-long mural by Mexican artist Alejandro L’occoco that pays tribute to harmony among cultures. Located a short distance from where the explorers roamed, Riverside Library has a riveting painting of Marquette and Joliet. Western Springs displays a genuine Norman Rockwell — “When I Am an Astronaut” — and this year Wheaton opens a large Arts and Culture Center.

Best Bastions of Democracy

Actually, all libraries deserve a nod here. The assets of a public library are equally available. “It doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor, what race you are or what your beliefs are. When you walk into a library, it’s yours,” says Medal of The Gail Borden Library in Elgin. Adds Rothenfluh of Naperville Library, “We’re a democratic institution. It doesn’t matter how much you pay in property taxes, if you live in a million dollar home or an apartment, you get the same access to the library.”

Even better, though supported by taxes like park districts, library programs most often are free. A library remains the ultimate bootstrap for lifting oneself to new heights. Says Medal, “We’re here for people if they want to grow themselves, if they want to change their lives.” ■