

Artist/librarian helps patrons practice both this summer

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Leon County librarian Michelle Ray spent quarantine as a crafting machine. Ray, alongside fellow staffers, founded the "Annie Get Your Glue Gun" virtual crafter's meet-up back in April. The group focuses on one weekly DIY project that upcycles common household items like plastic bags and yarn; participants have made everything from bracelets to wreaths.

As the library shifts into its summer schedule of programming, Ray says the group will continue to meet on the first and third Saturday of every month. She is looking forward to hosting a class to create homemade beauty products in July, but her favorite craft so far has been tying together pom-poms.

"There is something so gratifying about making these little fluffy yarn balls," says Ray, who used the pom-poms in one meet-up to make garlands.

"We have approached our adult programming with a blend of real, pragmatic topics and things that are relaxing or escapist to give a variety of flavors for our patrons."

Before joining in the library system, Ray worked as a professional photographer in a local archive and taught as an art professor. She earned her MFA in book arts and practiced traditional bookbinding and letterpress printing. Ray believes her blended fine arts background has made her both an analytical artist and creative librarian.

When printmaking, she would often labor over the heavy machinery, adjusting settings and rollers for hours before ink was applied to paper. Similarly, this dedication allows her to dig deep into the creative process, obsessing over the details of any given project and devising new offerings for the community.

"I love when all the possibilities are wide open and you're just throwing ideas out there," says Ray. "All of our



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programming is made in response to community needs, but there is a part of program creation that's just brainstorming. I feel like a child when we can creativity think and not have any limitations on our imagination."

Ray's approach to programming mirrors this year's children and young adult programming theme, "Imagine Your Story." Though library buildings are

open for 50% capacity, all programming is continuing to be offered via Zoom. When coming inside to pick up materials, patrons are asked to wear masks and practice social distancing.

The library is also continuing to offer curbside pick-up, contact-free, for all materials. Ray says the "Always Open" page on the website contains detailed information on streaming services, databases and how to register for a library card and receive access within minutes.

"It's easier now than ever to be a library patron, as we cater to everyone's levels of how they are able to or wish to interact with the community during the pandemic," says Ray.

She is proud of how quickly staff members were able to shift gears and fill up the activity calendar in the past few months and emphasizes that many programs are designed with the entire

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family in mind. Family Fun programs take place for all ages at 6:30 p.m. on Monday nights, and feature a variety of performers, musicians and storytellers.

The weekly Saturday Scavenger Hunt challenges patrons to find indoor and outdoor items around their homes, while the Adventure Bags program invites families to request online and pick-up craft and activity bags that celebrate a different fairy tale theme.

“They are flying out of the library,” says Ray, who sees the library adopting a blended approach to future programming that uses in-person and virtual models. “The COVID-19 pandemic has been heartbreaking for the library community because we know our community needs us more now than ever, but we’re very limited in how we can serve everyone. We’re doing everything we can to overcome those obstacles.”

One way she is tackling those hurdles is serving on the Essential Libraries Initiative. The initiative aims to re-evaluate and re-design library services and programming within the next five years. In many ways, the pandemic jump started many of these changes, and Ray says the goal is to be better attuned overall to the Tallahassee community.

Since March, ideas for how to best shift services have changed drastically, given the current economy, health crisis and necessity for more socially conscious and equitable institutions. Ray says this has led to conversations on having the library be more of a hub for civic discourse.

It will offer a virtual screening and panel discussion of the documentary “RIGGED: The Voter Suppression Playbook” at 6:30 pm Tuesday and a presentation by the National Alliance on Mental Illness titled “In Our Own Voice” aimed at — destigmatizing mental health conditions at 6 p.m. July 9.

Ray feels her best when she puts in the work to serve the community. She reiterates the importance of focusing on how to help one another, as well as educate one another and address pressing social issues.

“The public library is part of the cultural fabric of the community as a place where people come to connect — whether it is connecting with someone from 200 years ago while reading an older work of fiction or signing on a virtual meeting to enjoy a craft group



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If you go

What: 2020 Virtual Summer Programming

When: Days and times vary

Cost: Free (RSVP required for some events)

Contact: For more information please visit the Activity Calendar

across the internet,” says Ray. “We are this wonderful intersection where people from all socioeconomic backgrounds and interests can come together and share experiences and ideas.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).