

Ga. artist brings style to outdoor story time

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In Thomasville, story time with family is now a walk in the park. Thomas County Public Library installed illustrated picture book pages throughout a half-mile loop in downtown's Paradise Park, and features a different picture book each month.

The library's marketing coordinator Samantha Hanchett launched "Story Walk Thomasville" in July as a way to

stay connected to the library during quarantine.



Hanchett

"There is a family that has come every month and they know when I'm changing the book," said Hanchett. "The other day I was in the middle of changing it, and it was so nice to see the children read one book page and race their brother or sister to get to the next page. It's a lot of fun."

Three years ago, Hanchett moved back to Thomasville from Los Angeles to be closer to family. She changed careers from fashion and personal styling to creating striking displays and artistic partnerships for the library.

Hanchett has always been drawn to the visual arts. Her favorite books as a child were by illustrators like Bill Peet. She recalls checking out his autobiography from her local library several times over the years.

When she took on her current role,

she was surprised to find that many area libraries wanted to make changes in the way they to display books and to update their decor.

"Everyone was moving into more of a fashion focused, retail focused view, and librarians were wondering how to do this," said Hanchett. "I've been focusing on this my entire career. For me, it felt so natural that you would instantly want to make everything visually appealing."

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Hanchett

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Hanchett enjoys the more “outlandish walking works of art” from fashion moguls Alexander McQueen and Balenciaga. When it comes to designing displays, she takes a similar approach — thinking outside the box so community members can engage with books in new ways.

On social media, she arranges photos so people get a sense of what they can see and do at the library. She has also been instrumental in giving the inside of the library a fresh coat of paint and more artistic touches to draw in readers.

Every fall she partners with local artist association Pines and Palms to host a two-month art exhibition. One of her favorite pieces in the permanent hanging collection is of a rooster in an expansive barn.

“It’s so peaceful and serene,” said Hanchett. “It’s in a well-lit little corner and I always suggest people go to see it if they want a quiet area to sit and be in.”

Hanchett typically creates special displays around particular weeks or holidays. Banned Book Week takes place each September, and last year she was able to create a memorable, interactive display. She wrapped books in censor tape and made a jail-like display that patrons could walk in and find themselves “arrested” for having read a banned book.

In February, she created a book display that invited patrons to “speed date” a selection of books to find their new favorite genre. Each display took anywhere from one to two weeks to create. Hanchett always wants the end result to inspire patrons to take a photo or come back again.

“When you come to the library, you’re not only looking for entertainment, you’re looking for knowledge and you want to be able to learn something you didn’t have or find a new perspective,” said Hanchett. “My main focus is finding those topics and putting them out there for people to start looking at things differently.”

The pandemic closed the library’s doors for nearly two months, stopping foot traffic entirely. Now that it’s open with limited services, Hanchett is hopeful that patrons will return to take advantage of its resources. In the meantime, she is shifting her focus to public art and making the library’s exterior a point of interest.

Story Walk serves as a launchpad for



Participants follow the large, colorful story book pages throughout the park in Story Walk Thomasville.

SAMANTHA HANCHETT

If you go

What: Story Walk Thomasville

Where: Paradise Park, 403 S. Broad St., Thomasville, Ga.

Cost: Free

Contact: Visit tcpls.org

more library-in-the-community programming. The original idea came from a librarian in Vermont, who placed laminated book pages along hiking trails. Hanchett said the Thomasville library added to the idea by inserting activity pages between the illustrations to direct readers to get active.

The first book, “If I Had a Sleepy Sloth” by Gabby Dawney, had pages that encouraged young readers to move around slowly, meditate and even run to Paradise Park’s playground to hang from the monkey bars like a sloth would. Another, “The Magical Yet” by Angela DiTerlizzi, focused on trying new things. Readers were asked to think about a goal or dream they might have and try it out — whether it’s to do the perfect cartwheel or practice a new dance skill.

Hanchett appreciates the patrons who continue to embrace their role in the community, no matter where programming is located. She is excited by the possibilities the Story Walk program has opened up for the library and wants to continue making it a place where everyone feels welcome.

“When I see street art or programming, I feel more connected to the community, because it feels like there’s something living and breathing in the city,” said Hanchett. “A lot of people don’t think about what a library really does and how it benefits everyone, but it is a center of community.”



The Thomasville Public Library is trying to keep in touch with its community by moving activities outdoors during the pandemic. SAMANTHA HANCHETT



Hanchett creates special displays for Banned Books Week. SAMANTHA HANCHETT