

IN THE COUNTRY OF ANYTHINK

Outside Denver, a small system speeds transformation, dropping Dewey, calling librarians “Guides”—and becomes a lab for rethinking

By Norman Oder

Beyond the sprawling Denver International Airport, there’s little to put Adams County, CO, on the map. The region’s light rail only stretches south, so Adams County, a mostly working-class zone to the northeast, has come late to growth. There’s no central city; the community is dominated by strip malls, big-box stores, and new developments.

For librarians, however, the county’s library system, the Rangeview Library District, is very much on the national map, after perhaps the most dramatic turnaround in the nation. Rangeview and its zippy Anythink brand were the talk of the Public Library Association (PLA) National Conference this past March. The PLA program, punctuated by an audience-wide kazoo-ing of “Yellow Submarine,” provoked a standing ovation from more than 500 attendees.

Beyond the deep rebranding effort, the Anythink “revolution” includes constructing four innovative buildings, dropping Dewey for the “WordThink” system, eliminating fines, upending summer reading for the more experiential MySummer, and recasting staff roles from librarians to Guides, bolstered by Concierges and Wranglers.

Usage statistics, not surprisingly, have vaulted, and building openings make for community celebration. Job applicants line up. Anythink has joined the short list of must-see libraries for those thinking ahead. *LJ* visited in September to get a closer look.

Lessons for ANY library

The transformation of the mediocre Adams County Library into the snazzy Anythink—an anchor in a community with few cultural institutions—won’t be fully emulated by well-established libraries. After all, some Denver-area systems have long used retail strategy to drive significant use. For example, the Schlessman Branch of the Denver Public Library (DPL) pioneered bookstore elements, and the Arapahoe Library District’s

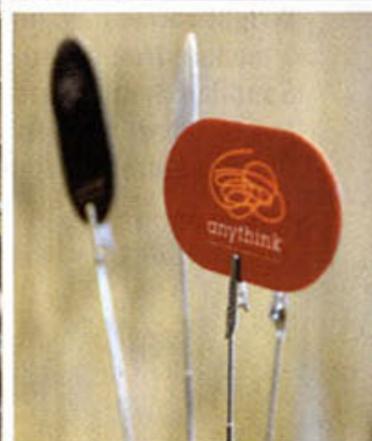


Southglenn Branch occupies prime space in a massive mall.

Nonetheless, the Anythink story suggests that public libraries, given leadership and new (but not huge) money, can foster a start-up culture, taking a fresh look at almost everything. Leadership, in this case, comes from Pam Sandlian Smith, who arrived as director of Adams County in 2007, and was named the Colorado Association of Libraries (CAL) Librarian of the Year for 2010. She is bolstered by an unusually simpatico administration team.

“Instead of trying to get everything perfect,” observes Smith, “we work to get the big idea right, then circle back to

Norman Oder, former LJ Executive Editor, News, left in October to work on a book. He edited Pam Sandlian Smith’s “Tropical Makeover” feature (LJ 12/06, p. 70)



WORKING ANYTHINK (clockwise from top l.) Sandlian Smith leads a weekly meeting of the Anythink admin team, including (l.-r.) Steve Hansen, Lynda Freas, Mindy Kittay, Susan Dobbs, and Ronnie Storey-Ewoldt. Collection development manager Rachel Fewel (l.) and Anythink Wright Farms project

manager Chandra Jones work on a new subject “neighborhood.” The logo is part of a key-sized library card. At the Wright Farms front perch, Guide Katie Meis (r.) assists Debbie McCrery

Rising from the bottom

Though the sequence of events gets elided in the official Anythink story, it was Sandlian Smith’s predecessor, Michael Sawyer, who began turning the library boat around. In July 2003, the *Denver Post* published an article with a brutally blunt headline: “Adams library system worst in state.”

The Adams County Library System, with a collection geared more to reference than popular materials and small, musty branches, had been mired in a vicious cycle. Unable to muster political support, it then failed to deliver quality service to in turn generate funding from a skittish county commission. Sawyer’s predecessor was too swamped to do outreach. The system couldn’t afford spine labels to mark mysteries.

While an ambitious \$52 million levy failed in 2005, Sawyer warned of potential branch closures if new funding wasn’t approved. The new levy passed in 2007, on the third round. “It was a dramatic shift,” recalls architect Dennis Humphries, of Denver-based Humphries Poli Architects, who has designed all the new buildings.

Sawyer even garnered a 2005 CAL award for the new Rangeview Library District logo. But he lost the confidence of the board and left; he now leads the growing Calcasieu Parish Library, LA. At Rangeview, a director search ensued.

Making her case at Rangeview in her public presentation in late 2007, director candidate Sandlian Smith, then heading the West Palm Beach Public Library, FL, talked about transformations in the library world such as the Idea Stores in London and the impact of companies like Apple. At the end of her board interview, Sandlian Smith, who describes herself as “very shy and very quiet,” boldly laid it on the line: “I believe the responsibility of a leader is to shoot for the moon,” she said. “If you want to build regular, normal libraries, don’t hire me.”



You are not just an employee, volunteer or board member.
 You do not merely catalog books, organize periodicals and manage resources. You are the gateway into the mind of the idea people who come to our facilities to find or fuel a spark.

Part WIZARD
Part GENIUS
Part EXPLORER

It is your calling to trespass into the unknown and come back with a concrete piece someone can hold onto, turn over, and use to fuel their mind and soul.

On board in Adams County

Sandlian Smith brought a sensitivity to library spaces and a willingness to innovate, both features at her career at West Palm Beach and, previously, at DPL. (See “A Director’s Roots,” www.libraryjournal.com/roots.)

Once in place, she didn’t start from scratch. Several members of the admin team had already been hired. Humphries Poli and a project manager had been chosen, with a construction company lined up and funding plans nearly done. The library board had been primed by library visits to places like Chicago and board chair Kay Riddle’s service on the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS). The board envisioned libraries as playing an outside role in new communities that lacked traditional centers.

Sandlian Smith was the leader they sought. “Pam just had so much enthusiasm and so much vision of what this can be,” Riddle recalls.

The growing county sorely lacked sufficient buildings. Humphries, working with the district since 2002, initially prepared a plan to vault from six facilities with a total of just 35,000 square feet to a system with 150,000 square feet. A consultant helped with programming.

The levy request was modified, so the funding—capital monies plus annual payments via the lease-financing mechanism known as “Certificates of Participation”—will support

124,000 square feet.

They conducted focus groups and began designing the buildings. “Then Pam came along,” he recalls. “It wasn’t singing with her. She said to focus on the quality of the space, rather than the number of books we’d put in the space. As an architect, it was refreshing to have that.”

The building in rural Bennett, 7000 square feet on the eastern plains, replaced a structure from 1961. Sandlian Smith insisted that the building be distinctive and welcoming, with wood shelving and some expensive carpeting.

“We wanted to create a building that recognized some urban quality but was residential,” Humphries says of the branch, which boasts a fireplace and geothermal heating and cooling. The opening, he recalls, was “incredible, just miles and miles of kids and people.”

In fast-growing Brighton, the team dropped plans to expand the original library and instead built a new library downtown, next to an armory being renovated for a cultural center. With photovoltaic cells (thanks to a state grant) and other green features, the building is touted as the first carbon-positive library. (Some purchased carbon credits—a bit of a gimmick—got them over the hump.)

Later, as plans for the larger libraries emerged, Sandlian Smith asked the architect for more. “Pam would kind of drop these bombs on us,” Humphries recalls. “She wanted a tree house to be the signature piece of these libraries.” There’s one in Huron Street, which opened this February, at 25,000 square feet, and another coming to the headquarters library, Wright Farms, 45,000 square feet, both in the “boomburb” of Thornton.

Enter Anythink

As the first new libraries were being built, the board and leadership team wanted a brand that reflected and propelled the library, feeling the name Rangeview just didn’t work. Via an RFP, they found the marketing firm Richochet Ideas. “We started talking not just about an external brand but an identity that would start on the inside,” recalls firm principal John Bellina. “A bit more of a soul.”

Lacking experience working with libraries—an advantage, according to Bellina—the firm stressed the need to offer a compelling reason for people to embrace libraries. Expanding on the idea that the library was a place of unlimited learning and potential, Bellina and the library team created a staff manifesto (see p. 20).

It drew applause at an all-staff meeting and, later, cheers at PLA.

Next came a new brand. Bellina tossed out several examples, including the name “Blue Sky Factory,” signifying imagination. Staffers found the term Anythink arresting but a bit intimidating. Sandlian Smith and her team pondered it for a week before they said yes. “It didn’t have any preconceived ideas” attached to it, she says, and was playful and flexible. (Indeed, later came WordThink and “Anythinkers.”)

Soon followed the Doodle, the playful blob that serves as a logo. “Everybody sees something a little different in it,” suggests Susan Dobbs, the library’s human resources director.

Without a big budget, Bellina helped devise stealth ways to get the word out: staff name tags asking, “What do you think?” and T-shirts with slogans like, “SHHH is a four-letter word.” Then came the banners for the parking lots. To rethink summer reading, Bellina helped the staff put on their “Anythink goggles.”

This is all strategy, not frill. Says Sandlian Smith, “I think you can be a brilliant organization, but without proper marketing/PR you will never be as strong or as viable as you need to be.” As such, the Communications Department reaches deep into the library’s activities. It not only creates newsletters, press releases, and advertising and writes speeches but also coordinates special events, manages signage, and runs the public art program.

Anythink by the Numbers

LOCATION/SQUARE MILES	Adams County, CO; 2000 square miles
POPULATION SERVED	327,612 (about 87% of county)
CARDHOLDERS 2009	65,792
CARDHOLDERS 2010	86,434
OPERATING BUDGET 2010	\$12,674,179 (or \$9,425,244 plus \$3,248,925 lease purchase interest and principal)
PER CAPITA BUDGET	\$39
PERCENTAGE SPENT ON MATERIALS	11.5% (15.5% if lease purchase funds eliminated)
NUMBER OF BUILDINGS	7 (two closed and under renovation/expansion)

Managing Anythink

It was fortuitous that, early in her tenure, Sandlian Smith ran into Steve Hansen, an old DPL colleague, at a restaurant and hired him for a project. That became a job and, for him, a mission. In July 2008, Hansen joined the admin team and thought, “With this group, we can leap over a whole bunch of traditional steps. Over a period of about two weeks, we sort of mind-melded.” Working up to 60-hour weeks, Hansen says, people just don’t have time for any internal politics.

Human Resources director Dobbs spent most of her career in “pre-IPO high-tech companies” and likens Anythink “very much to a start-up,” with a lean staff working long hours, fueled by passion.

Ronnie Storey-Ewoldt, the public services director, has had a wide-ranging library career that included a detour to manage a theater company. She left vendor Innovative Interfaces because she saw Rangeview was “on the edge of doing something really amazing...and I haven’t stopped dancing yet.”

She’s helped organize staff teams to rethink and standardize policies, in a system where branches—some quite distant—were “run as city-states.” Trying ideas big and small, a fine-free policy—one that a handful of libraries had already embraced—soon emerged.

The ability to flex

Storey-Ewoldt calls hiring new staffers “great fun,” because of creative job descriptions and the up-front recognition that “we’re very much at the beginning of making it up.” One fundamental: a friendly greeting to all customers. Does that happen? Most of the time, according to *LJ*’s observations.

Managers didn’t want anyone on the floor looking like they were doing clerical work, thus presenting an “I’m busy” barrier to customers seeking assistance. All materials handling is done by Wranglers, essentially library aides, while Concierges—a customer service version of library assistants—spend nearly all their week on the floor.

When job descriptions were revised, some people moved up and some moved down the totem pole, but no one saw their salary drop (though the capacity for increases could hit a cap). Some former library assistants decided they were a better fit as

Wranglers, rather than the better-paid Concierges.

Achieving culture change hasn't been simple—for instance, one new hire, shocked to see the reference desk gone, bowed out—but, says Storey-Ewoldt, “95 percent” of staff in the branches have made the transition.

A Guide is not a traditional librarian, as the job description includes “part customer education, part reference advocate, part event planning.” The district was librarian-light, so eight MLS librarians were hired in a year.

Now, of the 16 staffers working as Guides, nine have MLS degrees, and one has a master's in education. “It's important to have an MLS presence,” says Jones of Wright Farms, but the most important quality is the “ability to flex.”

Children's, teen, and tech Guides do a lot of programs, Storey-Ewoldt says, while adult Guides do a wider range of tasks and keep their reference skills honed by working the statewide AskColorado service.

Guide Mo Yang started eight years ago as a page and after a supervisor asked him to develop teen programming, he built his expertise. Now a Guide, he says the term “really encompasses everything I do.”

A library degree isn't required to run a branch. In Brighton, one of the region's fastest-growing communities, Todd Cordrey serves as Anythink Manager/Experience Expert. A former real estate broker and president of the local school board, he's finishing his master's in public administration.

He leans on MLS librarians on issues like privacy and intellectual freedom but sees his main job involving such things as developing a Friends organization, building relationships with the schools, and working with the adjacent armory, part of a nascent cultural center. Indeed, *LJ* visited on the day of an Eco-fair held in the parking lot the facilities share, an event sponsored by the city, in cooperation with the institutions.

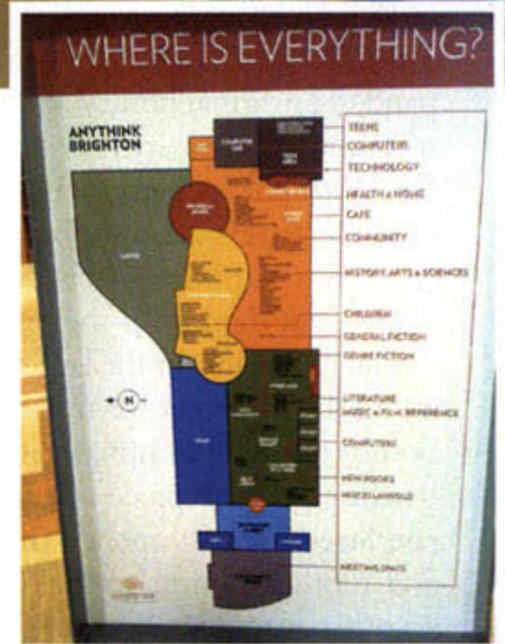
To build teamwork, Sandlian Smith early on brought in the G.A.S.P. (graphics, ambience, style, and presentation) consultant who helped her revamp West Palm Beach. Now a staff group known as the “Yellow Geckos” is charged with training and morale.

With a significant chunk of its budget devoted to building expenditures, Rangeview keeps personnel expenditures costs to about 60 percent. The staff is relatively thin, but front-line staff did get raises this year, thanks in part to careful fiscal management, such as discounts on benefits and from vendors.

Anythink seeks clever ways to make the pot sweeter. Because the library pays many bills (on time) with credit cards that accrue points, it can send staffers to conferences and training events without cost, says finance director Mindy Kittay, a former CFO and consultant for many small businesses, who began a new library career eight years ago. Also, staffers can partake in a technology lending program—iPads, Flip cameras, etc.—and buy technology at the library's discount, with the payment deducted



THE SIGNS OF ANYTHINK (clockwise from top l.) Subject signage also sits on shelves. Custom chairs feature the system's “doodle” logo. The branch in the frontier town of Bennett offers a Western-style veranda. A map of the Brighton branch space (inset) helps steer customers



from their paychecks over three months, interest free.

Embracing WordThink

Good ideas in the library world are often borrowed, and the decision to drop Dewey—the first full system to do so—

came after a staff visit to the Maricopa County Library District, AZ, which pioneered such a plan in 2007 at its Perry Branch (see “The Dewey Dilemma,” *LJ* 10/1/09, p. 22–25).

“We were completely bowled over at how simple it was,” recalls Rachel Fewell, collection development manager since February 2009. In moving to WordThink last year, Rangeview adapted the book industry categories used in Maricopa.

As Fewell explained at PLA, some 90 percent of materials are cataloged and processed by Baker & Taylor, and some categories have grown and shrunken. True crime remains a challenge, but graphic novels have become much easier to find. More recently, the business section has been expanded to include job hunting.

Rangeview shelves some magazines and videos with nonfiction, allowing for a more seamless experience, though a larger nonfiction collection—as some outside librarians observe—would pose a significant challenge.

As with the library openings, the WordThink launch featured last-minute tweaks. “We worked seven days a week,” Fewell recalls of the first branch conversion. “We learned what we could reasonably ask staff to do.”

“Right now, we're not doing much assessment,” she says, noting the library system's growth spurt. She predicts 2011, with all system libraries open, will be an opportunity to measure what worked and plan for tweaks.

“I've had a lot of inquiries from school libraries,” Fewell relates. “I think the juvenile [Book Industry Standards and Communications] grid really speaks to educators and school librarians to empower students.”

Fewell reports to Family Services director Lynda Freas, who focuses on programs for the whole family.

On the edge of change

The MySummer program, the 2010 replacement for summer reading, also featured several family programs, notes Freas.





Stacie Ledden, the content editor in the Communications Department, helped spearhead MySummer, which included such things as a fashion show, a presentation about and with a hot-air balloon, and a close examination of the ecosystem of one square foot of soil.

LJ took a look at the stack of comment cards and saw most were positive (“We loved this summer at the library”), but a few folks were perturbed (“The kids missed the weekly prizes”).

While that response suggests that Anythink has mostly been able to bring its public along on the roller coaster of change, sometimes the library’s been out of step. For instance, vending machines offer only healthful snacks and sodas, but the revenue’s been less than the vendor hoped.

This summer, some locals complained that the American flag was not being flown outside libraries—a situation that generated some tough news coverage. The board, under pressure, agreed it had been an error. One defender of the library, commenting online, said he agreed with the library’s initial explanation that it had been wary of the maintenance costs. “They barely use employees at all,” he wrote. “Everything is self-service.”

Still, in communities long starved for library service, it’s no wonder Anythink won the regional newspaper’s “Best of MetroNorth” award as the “Best Place To Get Away from It All.”

A to-do list a mile long

In September, Anythink held its first fundraiser, Sparkopolis (another word dreamed up by Bellina’s team), at Wright Farms, aiming to support public art at the library. Architect Humphries cochaired the event, wanting to extend his association with Anythink and to be kept on his toes regarding the libraries’ future.

It was as playful as other things Anythink: the Inventing Room, a Denver caterer, made ice cream using liquid nitrogen. A cheese maven held forth. Questions on name tags fostered mingling. While the event netted \$12,000—a bit below expectations—it went overtime and “was a spectacular party,” recalls Sandlian Smith. Planning for next year’s event has begun.

Meanwhile, the last remaining work on three libraries continues, with the renovated and expanded Commerce City branch—in the county’s most industrial town, with nearly 40 percent Spanish speakers—set to open this month.

Even finished buildings remain in flux. Wright Farms, as of *LJ*’s visit in late September, lacked both an outside street sign and an internal map; both are now in place. A coffee

shop—the system’s first—should open next month.

The year 2011, Sandlian Smith says, is for stabilization, with contemplation and research key. Sunday hours will finally be offered, at Wright Farms. One innovation: community gardens at two branches, enabling Anythink “to get to know our communities in a way we haven’t before.”

Matt Hamilton, the new IT manager (chosen from more than 60 applicants), would like to launch more mobile applications but has some more basic tasks, like managing his job with what was, as of September, a very thin staff.

The Horizon ILS needs a successor and, though Anythink lost out on an LSTA grant last year to plan for a new ILS, Hamilton, a 2010 *LJ* Mover & Shaker, is keeping watch on emerging ILS innovation.

Hansen hopes for a stronger presence in social media. Storey-Ewoldt would like to see a mobile computer lab that doubles as a sound studio. Freas would like more intergenerational programming.

LJ queried a few patrons, who expressed enthusiasm about the library eliminating fines, separating children from teens, and simply offering more robust service than before. The fine-free policy has mostly worked, but it’s prompted the communications department to create clever reminders to nudge returns and much earlier than previously; the library will begin working with a collection agency late this fall.

Meanwhile, the not insignificant antitax sentiment in Colorado prompted statewide ballot measures, defeated earlier this month, that might have devastated public services in the state. Still, administrators and the board remain cautious about spending; the admin team didn’t take raises this year.

Anythink this year managed openings of new and expanded libraries by assigning staff from closed buildings, so it will have additional challenges next year.

With such an enormous county to cover, and a steadily growing population, the library will be continually challenged to extend service. In the longer run, Anythink, like all libraries, will face population ever more accustomed to digital media on portable devices. It will have the advantage of having created community in a county that needed it.

Aspiration as inspiration

Anythink has quickly become a destination for visitors from this country and beyond. One visitor from a state library told Sandlian Smith, “Anythink is where all libraries need to be.”

“This use of aspiration as a management tool is a profound insight,” suggests Jamie LaRue, director of the nearby Douglas County Library System, Castle Rock.

“Our work is just at the beginning,” Sandlian Smith cautions. Indeed, even after a strong rise in the number of cardholders (see box, p. 21), the ratio among residents remains below 30 percent.

“We’re testing the water,” she adds, “and making it safe for other libraries to test some new ideas.” The library website offers an Anythink Tank to collect documents, podcasts, and videos about the transformation.

Architect Humphries observes that, when visiting other libraries, “We’re constantly referencing what’s happening in Rangeview.” Not every library can start from scratch, he notes, so sometimes he’s sensed resentment.

“I don’t think Anythink is for everyone,” he concludes. “But I do think rethinking is for everyone. ■