

A Small Library Uses Technology to Make a Big Impact

In the past, being a great library required a huge building with endless stacks of books. To be relevant today, a library needs to provide users technology training and tools to access the vast amount of information available online.

The staff of the Veria Central Public Library in Veria, Greece, realized the power of technology early on. In 1992, the library's catalogue was already fully automated. In 1996, the library became the first in the nation to provide its users free access to computers and the Internet. In 1997, it was the first to have its own website.

Veria's library is small, serving the town's 50,000 residents and 130,000 more people in the surrounding areas, but its commitment to innovation and experimentation has made it a model for libraries in Greece and throughout the world. Most importantly, the mission of the Veria Library is to make a real difference in people's lives. "We didn't build our service on providing books. We built our name on the concept that we give you services to make your life easier and more enjoyable," said Ioannis Trohopoulos, the library's director.

Library Helps Community Overcome Challenges

Finding a job in the current economic climate is difficult, and it's especially challenging in Greece—particularly for young people looking for their first job. When 22-year-old Katerina Heimonidou saw an advertisement for an open position at a local mobile phone operator, she was excited but nervous, knowing she'd be up against stiff competition.

To help her put her best foot forward, she took a seminar at the library on how to create a resume using a special computer program. Besides getting individual attention from the teacher, she got support from her fellow students as well. The education and support paid off, leading to an offer of employment. Katerina credits the library for helping her rise above the crowds of unemployed—and giving her a much-needed head start in her career.

For Fatbarda Selami, an immigrant from Albania, the Veria Library helped her and her children adjust to their new home. Fatbarda and her family have been in Greece for 13 years, but adapting to a new culture was challenging at the beginning. They found comfort at the library, where there were books in their native language and a friendly staff always willing to help. "The library is a very beloved place," she said. "My children and I love to come here, for the books, the activities and the projects."

The Veria Library reaches out to immigrants like Fatbarda to make them feel welcome and help them assimilate. One of its many programs is called Untold Stories, where immigrants from Albania, Russia, Ukraine, and Bulgaria use computers to create visual narratives about their lives. The stories were posted on YouTube and a dedicated project website. "We thought it was a great idea because it would unite us more," said Fatbarda. "All immigrants have the same story—just in a different language."

Focus on Children to Create a Better Future

The Veria Library opened a new children's area, Magic Boxes, in April 2009. The idea was to create a space for children that would encourage their curiosity and show them that the library can be a place of surprise and excitement.

The bold, bright colors of Magic Boxes create a joyous atmosphere for children and parents alike. An outdoor garden provides areas for climbing, playing, and exploring. And there are plenty of comfortable places for reading and listening to music and stories.

There are computers with kids' software, video games, and regular activities and programs to keep young minds active and engaged. Fotini Hamidieli, an artist who conducts workshops with the children, noted that Magic Boxes promotes action and movement. "Magic Boxes encourages children to take off their shoes and get comfortable, so they can create and play and explore."

Spreading Successful Services to More People

A crucial aspect of the Veria Library's services is its mobile library program, which brings books and computer access to thousands of people in the surrounding villages who don't have easy access to a library. "I always went to the library as a young person," said Anna Anastasiou, a resident of the small agricultural village of Agios Georgios. "Now I am a mother, and I want my son to visit the library very often like I used to do. When the mobile library comes here, it's very exciting."

Two years ago, the Veria Library had to stop the mobile library program because it could not get support from the state to retain their drivers. Determined to find a way to keep serving the people who were counting on them, the staff went directly to the mayors of the villages and asked them to supply the drivers, which they gladly did.

"I'm not exaggerating when I say that when the library visits these kinds of small places, where there's no library or any kind of access to technology, in a way it changes their lives," said Kostas Karelis, the mayor of the Meliki Authority.

The staff is also working with the mayors of Makrochori and Agios Georgios to build new branches based on Veria's model. "I truly believe that this new library will be one of the most vital things in the region and will be a place that offers high-quality services that will improve the quality of life of our citizens," said Christos Tsiountas, the mayor of Agios Georgios.

Because the Veria Library has worked so diligently to form partnerships with other libraries, programs, and institutions within Greece and worldwide, it has been able to grow and thrive. Still, library director Ioannis Trohopoulos stresses that the most important thing for a library to do is listen to the needs of the people it serves. "The key is you have to be relevant. If your organization manages to be relevant throughout its life, you can survive."