

check it out!

Libraries aren't what
they used to be.

By Chris Godsey

Photography by Paul Najlis

A bronze sculpture of Ramona the Pest, with a wild, welcoming smile on her face and a right hand poised for giving high fives, stands just inside the St. Paul Central Library's youth services area, where two other sculptures of Beverly Cleary's beloved children's book character are frozen in laughter a few feet away.

"Look at how the surface of her palm is all worn off," says St. Paul Public Library youth services coordinator Karen Kolb Peterson, lightly pressing the spot where Ramona's hand has been rubbed smooth. "That suggests this [library] is a place for kids to be kids."

Ramona's invitation for children to explore the library with all their senses is a decided contrast to the traditional image of libraries as a place to sit quietly and read. It's also a reminder of the creative, unexpected ways that Twin Cities libraries are reaching out to their youngest patrons.

The new approach takes into consideration what kids need at different times in their lives and then tries to model services based on those needs, says Christy Mulligan, a librarian at the Minneapolis Central Library. "In every year, from age zero to eighteen, children are at a completely different developmental stage," she says. "That needs to be kept in mind in many ways—from how space is designed to how programs are designed."

In the seven-county metro area, where more than one hundred public libraries serve almost three million people representing at least ninety languages and dialects, a library's success in meeting these diverse needs depends largely on its often limited human and financial resources. Luckily, librarians are a quietly passionate lot. "The groovy thing about many librarians," says Kathleen James, youth services coordinator of the Metropolitan Library Services Agency, "is that they're willing to try anything."

Librarian Christy Mulligan in
Teen Central at the new
Minneapolis Central Library



New Libraries, New Look

Part of making kids more engaged library patrons is creating spaces they love to be in—and not sequestering them. "We used to put kids as far away from adults as possible," says Kolb Peterson from St. Paul's Central Library, which was renovated four years ago but still maintains the charm of the library's early twentieth-century façade. In the cozy children's section, the toys