

Chelmsford High School's *Learning Commons*: From Program to Facility

by Valerie Diggs

Students streamed into the library carrying trays of food, bottles of water and sports drinks, and paper bags bursting at the seams with sandwiches, fruit and cookies. This was a typical Friday during the school year. Fridays were *Listening Lunches* days and the students loved the opportunity to have lunch in the library while listening to their peers read poetry, sing songs, perform plays, play musical instruments, and more. Large rolling barrels stood ready to accept the half-eaten lunches and empty bottles, round tables adorned with tablecloths and vases of artificial flowers were arranged in the back corner of the library, and rows of red folding chairs awaited the throngs.



provided students at with the opportunity to ask questions, think about the answers, and create new meaning each and every day. Staff professional development sessions were held in the library, teachers came to work, students came to relax and learn, and our community showed us every day how important we were to the mission and ideals of our school.

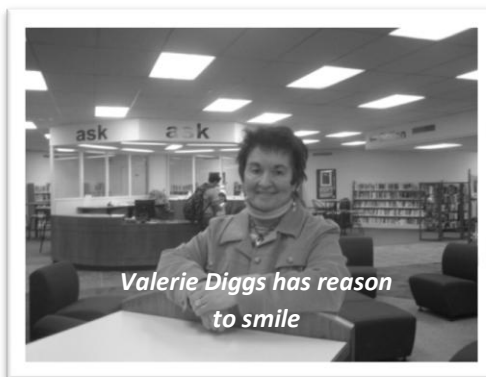
All of this took place in a facility that was as dreary and tired as the duct tape that held the carpet together

and kept the insurance inspectors at bay. As hard as I tried to convince our administrators that renovating the library would benefit every student and staff member in the school, my detailed reports, requests, budget submissions, and pleadings all were for naught. The District of Chelmsford began a 31-million dollar renovation plan which included a new performing arts center, new science wing with sparkling new labs, technology classrooms, and instructional spaces. The two middle schools received new libraries:

5,000 square foot wonders that soon became the "place to be" in both buildings.

Other schools were outfitted with new flooring, roofs, boilers,

etc. And through all of these renovations and building projects, the high school library remained as is: a tired, 34-year old space, with duct-taped carpet, bright yellow shelving and walls, and desks with broken drawers and peeling facades.



On Wednesday mornings, our *Java Room* opened at 6:45 AM, pots of steaming coffee and hot water for tea and

hot chocolate lined up beside the aging classroom desks placed side-by-side in the center of the library serving as a *Reference Desk* of sorts. Trays of donated pastries and bagels, here through the generosity of local Chelmsford businesses, beckoned hungry students and staff members. The lines were long, the laughter loud, the books on display enticing students to browse and check out books while they waited for their hot drinks. Students sat and talked, teachers and administrators readied themselves for a day of teaching and instruction by recounting events of the previous days and catching up on daily news.

And, every day, the library was full of teachers and their students ready to learn and discover. With a large space, enough room to accommodate six classes at tables and 38 students using the computers, the library

I admit, I did whine. But, whining did not seem to work. Now what? We had just hired a new town manager, Paul Cohen. In the process of interviewing Paul, he was taken on a tour of the town's buildings and facilities by the town's search committee. As for schools, he saw the high school (minus the library) and was escorted through the new science wing as well as our two beautiful new middle school libraries. The search committee didn't dare bring him near the high school library. It had become so embarrassing a space that avoiding it was a commonplace and accepted practice. So, I invited Paul Cohen for a special visit to my library.



To hear him tell it, it was the first time he had ever been called by a school librarian in over 17 years of public service. He came and saw. I gave him a tour, served him coffee in the workroom, told Paul all about our programs, services, and student learning experiences. He saw for himself not only the duct tape but the entire, sorry mess. That fall, the capital budget was announced and included over \$200,000 for the renovation of the high school library. In this case, a tour was worth many thousands of capital funding dollars. The rest is history.

Chelmsford High School now has a beautiful new space. We celebrated the opening of this space and its new name. *The Chelmsford High School Learning Commons*, on December 5, 2008. Our consultant, Carolyn Markuson, was on hand. Rolf Erikson, who worked alongside Carolyn, was in Germany and sadly unable to attend. The evening was a huge success.

At 2 PM on the afternoon of our Grand Opening Event, I found myself sitting in my new *Learning Commons* space with Ross Todd and Carol Gordon from Rutgers, David Loerstcher from San Jose State University and Hi Willow Press, along with Connie Champlain. I said, **“Pinch me, I think I’m dreaming.”**

The event was a huge success. The speeches were grand, from Ross Todd’s passionate endorsement of the *Learning Commons* model, to past and present principals of Chelmsford High School, Chairperson of the Board of Selectmen, our state senator, and our Town Manager, Paul Cohen. School and public librarians came, as well as



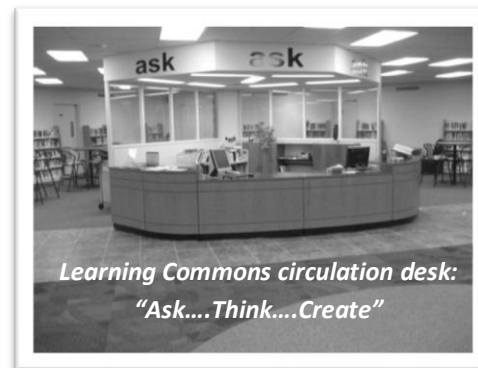
L-R: David Loerstcher, Carolyn Markuson, Valerie Diggs, Connie Champlin, Carol Gordon, Ross Todd



representatives from the Board of Library Commissioners and Simmons College, and the MSLA executive board. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and students were all present to celebrate this success.

Why a Learning Commons? How did we choose this path? How did the design for the space become a reality? First, and above all, came the program. The design simply flowed from what we do every day. Our school library had become central to everything meaningful in the school. Our only choice in a new design was to make the space fit our program.

And, fit it does!! From our café area with high tables and stools, to our built-in counter for laptops, to our restaurant-styled



booths, and the comfortable lounge furniture and large meeting/ performance space, our new *Learning Commons* is more than ever a place where students and staff are the center of all happenings. Activities, learning experiences, literacies, teachable moments, information sources, and technology explorations occur every day, all day.

It wasn’t all a dream...

... believe that you, too, can fulfill your dreams!

Valerie Diggs is the Director of Libraries in Chelmsford and Library Teacher at Chelmsford High School

Please visit the *Learning Commons*. Come to the school for a tour, or:

View the YouTube before-an-after slide show: http://docs.google.com/Presentation?id=df369mb7_68frqwjwf6

Visit our website: <http://www.chelmsford.k12.ma.us/chs/library/index.htm>

Read the Boston Globe article:

http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2008/12/08/new_learning_commons_defies_commonplace/