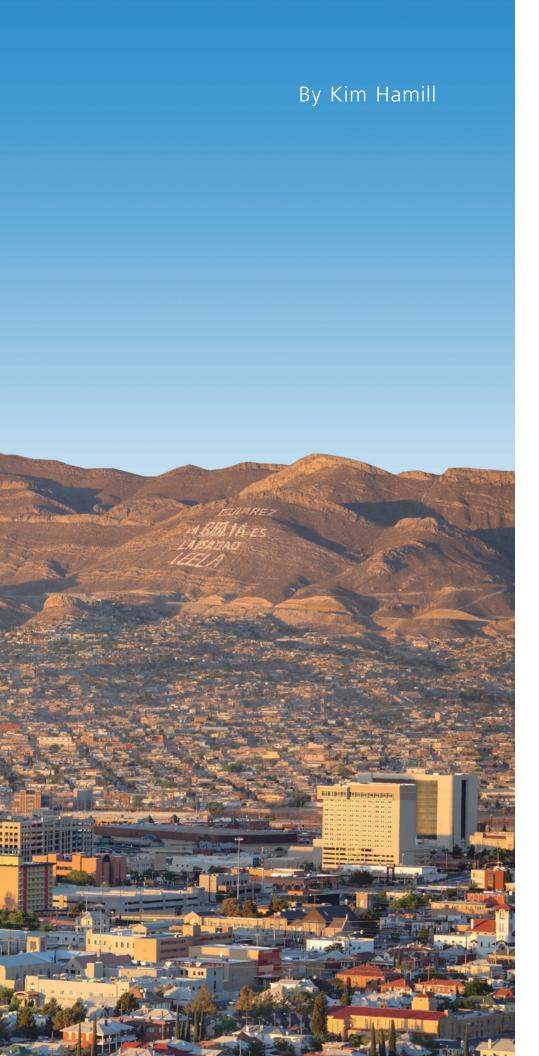# Inspiring Early Learners in
EL PASO

"We think that technology is really a big part of the world that children are going to live in, so we want to teach children that technology can be used as a tool to explore the world and to learn things."

– Helen Bell, Part-Time Librarian, Jenna Welch and Laura Bush Community Library, El Paso, Texas

By Kim Hamill

An innovative librarian

When the Internet and personal technology devices became prevalent, Monica Wong might have thought that her role as a librarian would take a backseat. She could have even perpetuated the idea that libraries are dusty, silent places used solely for academic endeavors and research.

Instead, as head librarian at the Jenna Welch and Laura Bush Community Library in El Paso, Texas, Wong transformed the library into a vibrant, bustling place at the heart of learning and discovery for an entire community.

Technology for toddlers

Where Wong and her colleagues could have rejected the use of educational technology, they decided to embrace it, developing innovative programs that combine technology with the goals of the library – promoting literacy, creating a sense of community and inspiring new ideas.

"We had one of our vice presidents telling us 'you are outdated.' Everybody can do research from home and use the Internet. The library will be extinct," Wong says. "We are actually flourishing. If you take the proactive position and really use the technology to your advantage – technology and literacy can really coexist. Actually, they are such important skills for the new digital generation that you cannot have one and lack the other."

According to Wong, in 2010 the library had more than 14,000 participants attend 530 programs on topics as varied as dancing, digital storytelling, blogging and sign language.

One of its most successful programs is the Toddler Tech program, which aims to help children aged two to five develop important literacy skills through early exposure to educational technology, including iPad and the SMART Table interactive learning center. Funding for this program came from the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

"We think that technology is really a big part of the world that children are going to live in, so we want to teach children that technology can be used as a tool to explore the world and to learn things," says Helen Bell, a retired K–12 and university librarian who now works part time with Wong.

The program, which uses a combination of whole-class, small-group and individual activities, helps students build literacy skills while learning about relevant themes, such as family, colors or animals.

At the beginning of the hour-long session, 18–20 children gather for story time, where they are introduced to a theme through a children's book. After the story is read aloud to the children, they are divided into groups of four or five and rotate through two stations with a SMART Table interactive learning center, a station featuring iPad and a Kids Cybernet Station that includes Peanut Butter Software – all while working on activities that reinforce the theme of the story.

Both Wong and Bell say that by having the children classify and group items on the multitouch

interactive learning center, it reinforces vocabulary and an understanding of concepts, such as comparing and contrasting. For instance, when the theme was animals, they used SMART Table to help the children classify animals on the basis of whether they had fur, feathers or fins.

"That's how we are getting children to examine the themes we are emphasizing with the SMART Table. We are emphasizing how to understand things. In other words, we are teaching thinking skills to babies," Bell says.

An inclusive program

Toddler Tech serves two early education programs in the community – the Migrant Education Program and a local Head Start program. The structure and goals of Toddler Tech are the same for both programs, with the one difference being that children participating in Toddler Tech

through the Migrant Education Program also bring their parents – and sometimes their grandparents, siblings and extended family.

The twist for the Migrant Education Program is because of the library's location and the patrons it serves. El Paso is located near the borders of Mexico and New Mexico. Wong says that because of its location, the library serves patrons from two U.S. states and the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, and 80 percent of its patrons speak Spanish.

Because of Toddler Tech, children have the opportunity to work with each other, their families and library staff to build important literacy skills. In turn, their parents and other family members attending the program have an opportunity to become more *technologically* literate.

Wong says that the migrant or immigrant population sometimes

feels the threat of the digital divide, because they do not have access to the latest technology devices. She says that somebody has to fill the role of helping these families learn to use technology, and the library is the perfect place to do it.

"A lot of the parents feel they are outdated. They simply don't have the means to afford the technology – especially when the technology changes so fast. And so a library can easily tap into this position, bring the whole family into this learning process and have fun," Wong says.

And to ensure that everyone feels included, there are volunteers and staff available who speak both English and Spanish. Instructions on the SMART Table activities are also provided in both languages.

Partnership of learning

The library not only serves the unique needs of the local

community but also the academic community. In fact, the library is also known as the El Paso Community College Northwest Library because of its location on the northwest campus of the college.

For Wong, being both a college and a public library means having a dual vision of serving the needs of the college's 3,200 students and 200 faculty members and the community's 1,600 users. She has found that the library's location on a college campus enables her to connect the expertise of the academic community with the needs of the local community. Toddler Tech is a prime example of how these groups have come together.

The program was created in partnership with the college's early childhood development department. Dr. Cristina Gonzalez, a professor in the department, collaborated with the library team to develop the program's instructional strategies, learning modules and SMART Table activities.

Gonzalez says that using SMART Table motivates young children and enables them to build important skills while being hands-on with their learning.

"The skills they acquire using these tools are important – for example, matching, comparing, differentiating, grouping. The tangrams in the SMART Table mimic the actual puzzle building of a real puzzle that children manipulate. This provides problem-solving skills," Gonzalez says, adding that child development theories have supported the importance of providing young children with material they can experiment with and touch.

"This use of their senses is critical in the development of cognitive and motor gains," she says.

Dr. Gonzalez's early childhood development students also act as facilitators during Toddler Tech. Wong and her colleagues have found that when working with such young children, it's beneficial to have facilitators guiding the children and ensuring they are getting as much as possible from the learning experience.

"We train our early childhood education students and students who major in education. We show them how to guide the little kids with all the activities, to reinforce those concepts and to model for parents. And we want them also to evaluate, to ask questions. They observe, they take notes, and also they have to fill out a survey," Wong says.

By having the education students act as facilitators for the program, they are gaining firsthand experience for applying pedagogical theory to the use of classroom technology. And, according to Christian Waldmannstetter, the library's technology specialist, young children also have someone to guide them through the learning.

"I think with a good facilitator, you can teach them a lot with the SMART Table, you can reinforce a lot of what they already know, and you can teach them new things," Waldmannstetter says.

A customized experience
Waldmannstetter's main role at the library is to maintain all of its educational technology, including a SMART Board interactive whiteboard, a SMART Podium™ interactive pen display, SMART Table interactive learning centers and iPad.

With a background in computer science, Waldmannstetter also provides technical guidance to Wong, Bell and Gonzalez and creates and customizes activity packs for SMART Table that meet the needs of the Toddler Tech program. He also customizes activities and SMART Notebook files that he downloads from the SMART Exchange website, and he's started creating his own applications for SMART Table.

One of the applications he's created using the software development kit for SMART Table and Microsoft® Visual Studio® 2008 is a matching game, similar to concentration. Students use their fingers to "flip over" two cards on the surface of SMART Table. Depending on the goal of the activity, they could be trying to find either matching or contrasting objects. Bell says they've also used Waldmannstetter's applications to help the children reenact the stories they've heard during story time.

Waldmannstetter also adds additional activities to existing SMART Table activities. A favorite application of library staff is the tangram application. In fact, he's almost lost count of the number of tangram activities he's created, but he says that

whatever activity Wong asks for, he tries to make it.

"I think the really great advantage of the SMART Table over the iPad, for example, is that you can develop your own content," Waldmannstetter says. "With the SMART Table, if you want to and you have some time, then you

can develop your own content, and you can trust that content since you developed it. So that is the big advantage over the iPad or other devices."

Learning comes together

Through collaboration and community building, the library team and the early childhood development department have created an inclusive program that combines educational technology, literacy and cross-generational learning.

The program has been so successful that the local Head

Start program has 420 of its students attending the Toddler Tech program this year. They have also noticed an increase in returning library patrons, particularly those from the Migrant Education Program.

"This program allows families, both children and their parents and [other] family members, to learn how to use these technology tools. They will be at a greater advantage when they enter the public school system, whether at the preschool or kindergarten levels. The fact that the goal of this program is early literacy is especially important to these families. The families begin to understand the culture of libraries," Gonzalez says.

The team at Jenna Welch and Laura Bush Community Library has proven that by understanding their patrons' needs and creating programs that appeal to a new generation of learners, libraries can become the heart of a community.

"Everybody was predicting that nobody would need libraries – you can be a self-learner [with technology]. No – not so. You still need interaction between human beings, and you still need a public space to come together and learn. And I think the SMART Table really provides that," Wong says.