

# TexasLibraryJournal

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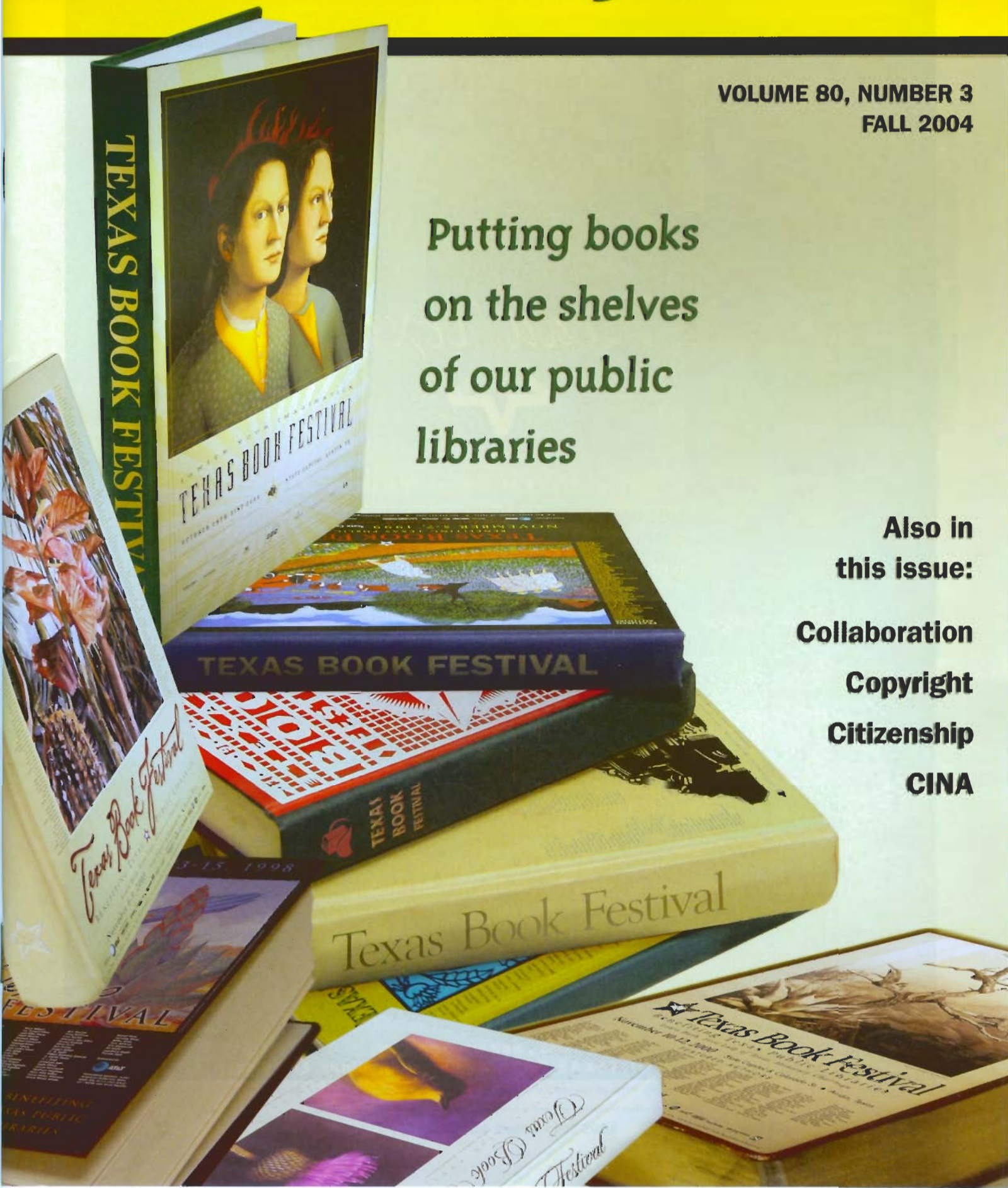
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# Rock the Vote

## at school

BY DON HAMERLY

*"I want to know what you are doing to celebrate National Library Week," our director said, emphatically.*

### The Master Plan

The plan was this: Enlist some people to speak in the library during the week and culminate the event with a Rock the Vote concert and voter registration drive among our high school seniors. We would contact some local politically-minded people, perhaps a politician or two, and ask that they speak to our teenage audience about the importance of active citizenship and the ways young people could become involved in the political process. We would inquire about using the Rock the Vote brand to advertise our voter registration drive, and we would recruit some student bands to perform in the library on Friday. We would also invite teachers to bring classes into the library to hear the speakers. And we would do this in less than a month.

After clearing the idea with our building principal, we first contacted Rock the Vote via their website (<http://www.rockthevote.com>) and ordered a voter registration kit for Texas. The RTV kit contains posters, stickers, and temporary tattoos, along with voter registration applications and explicit instructions for organizing an event. From the information provided in the kit we found that in Texas one must be a deputized voter registrar in order to collect voter registration applications and mail them collectively. My subsequent conversation with Kim Sutton at the Texas Secretary of State's office, which has the responsibility for promoting and managing voting in Texas, netted me not only instructions for becoming deputized but also a lead on a possible speaker, the secretary of state himself. After a brief visit to the local county tax office, I was an official volunteer deputy voter registrar. Soon after, I had confirmed our first speaker, Texas Secretary of State Geoffrey S. Connor.

### Recruiting Participants

Timing is everything, they say, and ours was not great for enlisting Texas politicians to speak. National Library Week coincided with the Texas Legislature's special session on school finance reform, so some of our prospects were reluctant to commit, even though they appreciated the invitation to speak to high school students. Our U. S. representative would be in Washington that week, and a local political writer loved the idea but had travel plans. In spite of these difficulties, everyone we contacted seemed enthusiastic about our plans, expressed regret for being unable to participate, and offered suggestions of other possible speakers. Before long, we had an event scheduled for every day of National Library Week: Texas Representative Dan Gattis, a Republican from our school's district, would



Photo courtesy of Don Hamerly, McNeil High School.

**And this time, she meant it. So, pressed for programming ideas and inspired to public-spiritedness by two speakers at the 2004 TLA Conference, UT Journalism Professor Robert Jensen and U.S. Presidential hopeful Ralph Nader, I suggested to my colleague Jane Thomas that we launch a week-long call to citizenship and dub it "Get political @ your library." Now, having an idea is one thing; harnessing it and making it work is another. Seeing it unfold and take on a life of its own, as we did, raises one's consciousness a bit. Before the week ended, we had hosted two state representatives, the Texas Secretary of State, the TLA lobbyist, two rock bands, two librarians from local Austin Public Library branches, and scores of students unaccustomed to spending time in the library.**

speak on Monday; Secretary Connor would speak on Tuesday; on Wednesday Texas Representative Dawnna Dukes, a Democrat from Austin, would talk; TLA lobbyist for library legislation Gloria Meraz would speak Thursday; and Friday the bands would rock the vote.

Pinning down a few politicians and one lobbyist to speak was easier than we thought it would be, but confirming two groups of 15 to 17-year-old budding rock stars proved problematic. A couple of students I know played in bands, but they recused themselves for having not practiced or played in a while. They did, however, suggest that I speak to some students I did not know who would likely be willing to play. After tracking down members of the two bands, This Side Up and El Torcho Torcho, explaining to them our idea, and convincing them that we did indeed want them to crank it up in the library, they nodded a bit with their mouths agape, muttered "Cool," and assured us they would take care of getting all their equipment in and out. After some reassurance from parents of the band members, we knew that our plan had gelled.

I pass the Milwood Branch of the Austin Public Library every day on my way to and from work at

McNeil High School but had never stopped to visit the facility. On my way home one day, I impulsively pulled into the parking lot, went in, and asked to speak to the branch manager, Lexie Graham. I told her about our campaign and asked if she might have someone willing to set up a table during our Rock the Vote event and give out information about TexShare. She agreed to come herself, on her day off, and she even recruited the manager from the Spicewood Springs Branch, Jerry Williams, to come, too, on her day off. This encounter confirmed for Jane and me what we had been sensing, that we had put into motion something that was beginning to take on a life of its own. So far, everyone we had recruited for our celebration was embracing it with exuberance.

### All About PR

Promoting "Get political @ your library" among the students and faculty became our next priority. This was a peculiar challenge, as we also had to work out the details of hosting an event a day during National Library Week without disrupting usual library business. We used the posters from the Rock the Vote voter registration kit along with flyers we made to advertise the speakers, the



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Rock the Vote concert, and the importance of registering to vote. We made use, too, of our PA announcements and our scrolling TV announcements to promote the week's activities. And we began booking classes to come hear the speakers. Originally, we were going to limit the audience to seniors who were at or near voting age, but interest spread to other classes. Soon we had booked 60 to 100 students and teachers for each of our four speakers. Now we just had to figure where to put them all. We wanted to host all the events in the library itself, so we had to devise a new floor plan.

All the speakers wished to speak in the afternoon, which gave us time in the mornings to conduct business as usual before school and then make use of the morning to set up, particularly on the Monday of National Library Week. With the help of our maintenance and custodial staff, we rearranged tables and chairs, brought in additional chairs and a podium, and created a comfortable space for the speakers and students in roughly half the library space, leaving the other half for patrons visiting the library for other reasons during the events. We set up a portable PA system for sound and a video camera that would broadcast the events live through our closed-circuit television system while recording them on videotape. We recruited students in our school's Air Force Junior ROTC program to greet our speakers and escort them to the library, and we had a little gift for each speaker. The stage was set.

### **On Democracy, Citizenship, and Participation**

In our initial conversations with the prospective speakers we discussed a focus for the talks. We asked the speakers to talk about the importance of active citizenship and what that meant to them. We asked them to discuss the ways by which young people could become engaged in the political process at different levels. We asked them to explain why young people should become involved. And we asked them to leave time for questions. The teachers scheduled to bring in classes knew what we expected of the speakers, but we had no idea what to expect from the students attending the sessions. Would our teachers prepare them? Would the students be attentive to our guests? Would they ask pertinent questions? Would they ask any questions at all? Just as we wanted our students to be impressed with what the speakers shared, we wanted our guests to leave knowing their time was well spent among young people with legitimate concerns and real knowledge of how

political decisions affect them. We were not disappointed.

Each of our guest speakers expected about an hour to talk and answer questions, and we were pleased to have to step in to conclude the session each day. All the guests spoke some about themselves and how they came to their current positions. They spoke of what their jobs required of them and how vital it is that they hear from their constituents. The same two senior government classes saw both Representative Gattis and Representative Dukes emphasize the importance of being an informed citizen, so they heard a similar message with different party "spins." Tuesday's audience enjoyed a lesson from Secretary Connor on the history of voting in the U. S. and the state of voting around the world that reinforced the American values of individual freedom and the responsibilities inherent in that freedom. Gloria Meraz impressed Thursday's audience with a message about being prepared to "rock the boat" when the need and the opportunity are there. And our students asked questions about the state of school finance, the reasons for reducing the CHIP program, the expectations for a selective service draft, and the problems of electronic voting, among other things. Every day many students stayed after the session concluded to talk with the speaker personally, and all our guests commented that the experience was well worth their time, one they would not mind repeating. By Thursday, we were impressed with ourselves for having pulled off such a successful event. But we still had Friday.

### **Rock the Vote**

Friday morning started off with the load-in. Our two bands hauled in equipment while we cleared the space of tables and chairs. Sound check that morning fueled some interest, and once we were set for the lunchtime culminating event, the anticipation was peaking. Our two friends from the Austin Public Library had come and set up outside our library. I set up a table for voter registration inside the library, and we left our doors open. When lunch began and the music started, we watched with some amusement as students we had never seen walked through the doors, hesitated for a moment as though something was not quite right, then melded in with the others that had gathered, dragged tables and chairs around, sat on the floor or stood among the stacks, and watched as the two bands rocked out for two and a half hours. I was able to address students as they entered, hand out a few stickers and tattoos, and register a handful of seniors that had not

already registered when they applied for their driver license. Our principal came by and offered to relax the “no one leaves the cafeteria at lunch” rule, which helped attendance. All in all, it was great fun.

As with a first undertaking of any kind, we learned we could have done some things better. Scheduling the Rock the Vote show at lunch prevented some from attending until our principal freed the cafeteria crowd. By that time many of our upper classmen, the initial target audience, were eating off campus and then leaving for the day. Surveying the senior classes to find out who had and had not already registered, and then distributing registration materials there would have been more effective.

## The Result

Our National Library Week “Get political @ your library” speaker series, Rock the Vote concert, and voter registration drive succeeded. Even with the limited planning time we had available, the event worked because the idea of introducing kids to the democratic process – in a very hands-on way – appealed to everyone involved. Jane Thomas and I were amazed at the enthusiasm with which the adults and students we approached helped make the program work. We brought students and teachers and political leaders together to share ideas in one of the greatest of democratic public spaces, the library. We turned a usually quiet space into a music hall for a day and likely recruited some new library patrons. And we sent a message that we will continue to send, that nothing is more important to maintaining a democracy that serves all citizens than the right and responsibility of the citizenry itself to educate themselves on the issues and become involved in the political process. Where better to hear and practice that ideal than in the library? ★

**Don Hamerly and Jane Thomas are school librarians at McNeil High School, Round Rock ISD.**



**Insets: Secretary of State Geoffrey Connor, Representative Dawna Dukes, and Representative Dan Gattis**

**Photos courtesy of Don Hamerly, McNeil High School.**

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