

CHARTER SCHOOL LIBRARY CELEBRATES RESTORATION

March 8, 2007, by San Jose Mercury News reporter Sharon Noguchi

The new library at Edison McNair Academy in East Palo Alto has more than 6,000 books. But the best story may be its own.

It's the story of a principal who badly wanted a resource many schools take for granted. Of a foundation seeking to grow. Of generous donors looking to make an impact. Of volunteers giving thousands of hours to help a school fulfill its dream.

After 10 months of fundraising, cataloging and heavy lifting, the library at the charter school opened Wednesday with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, accolades and music at the intermediate school.

For volunteers, teachers and students attending the event, about 50 fifth and sixth graders said it all in a rap performance:

“I like big books and I cannot lie...Learning letters, preparing, I’m hooked and I can’t stop staring. Oh students I wanna read with ya.”

Or, in the words of 12-year-old Trevon Jackson, who just checked out “How to Be a Pirate”:

“This is the best library you could have.”

The McNair library story is remarkable in an era when statewide targeted funding for school libraries has shriveled. Through 2001, the state offered about \$28 a student to districts for books, equipment and other library resources. By 2004-05, the figure had shrunk to 71 cents a student.

Today the funds are lumped into block grants for districts to use at their discretion. And without top-level library advocates, many districts channel those funds to math or reading specialists or to other needs deemed more critical to improving test scores.

But libraries are critical learning tools, educators say. Studies in 16 states have shown that student achievement rises in schools that have librarians, networked resources and collaboration between teachers and libraries, said Barbara Jeffus, school library consultant with the state Department of Education.

At McNair, the library had languished in recent years before completely disappearing two years ago, when the books were boxed up and moved out during campus remodeling.

But last spring, plans for the library’s rebirth emerged.

“I thought this was an obvious thing to do,” said Mark Goldsmith of Menlo Park, who with his wife, Anne Midler, donated the seed money for the library through the East Palo Alto Kids Foundation.

The foundation invested \$7,500 which the school matched, to purchase books and equipment. Then volunteers rolled up their sleeves. Foundation board member Laura Roberts approached Karen Shannon and Jane Sanders, who had library expertise from volunteering at their children’s school, Almond Elementary in Los Altos.

“We were not jumping into it wholeheartedly,” Shannon said.

Then Principal Douglas Harrell spoke to them. “It’s hard to say no to him,” Shannon said.

Since last May, the two women have spent about four days a week on the library.

Tanner Hanson, a sophomore at Los Altos High, coordinated volunteers to help build bookcases, which he did to earn his Eagle Scout award. In looking for a service project, he said, he sought something that was really needed – not, say, a shed for sports equipment in his own well-off community.

Without a school librarian, Shannon and Sanders trained the teachers to use the computerized cataloging and check-out system.

Now, Shannon worries how the library will be run in the long term. State statistics show that libraries thrive when districts have a librarian. As a charter school, McNair has discretion over its own budget. Harrell says he’ll hire a part-time librarian next school year.

Jeffers says the library’s most effective allies have been parent groups that insist on – and help fund – books for their children.

McNair has begun to enlist parents of children at the school, said Danitra Nash, a McNair administrator.

Harrell says he’s grateful to parents who advocated for others’ children. “They truly gave this school a gift.”