

# VERBYL: YEPPON'S UNIQUE YOUTH LOUNGE / YOUTH LIBRARY

**Debra Burn** *Coordinator, library and arts services, Livingstone Shire Council Queensland*  
*Received May 2007*

*VerbYL is a standalone shopfront youth space incorporating a library service and general youth services for young people aged 13-25, located in the main street of Yeppoon Central Queensland. Critical success factors include the equal partnership between council's youth services and library services; the development of a distinctive brand for the service; and the engagement of young people in the design and ongoing operation of the service. VerbYL was recognized in the national awards for local government 2006 as the winner, youth engagement category; and by the Queensland Public Librarians Association for innovative service provision to the community in 2006. It is possibly unique worldwide.*

**T**he idea for *verbYL* arose out of consultation with young people which occurred during 2002/2003.

Council had commissioned a review of youth services in Livingstone Shire. Concurrently, but separately, it had also commissioned a scoping study to determine the community's expectations for a new main branch library in Livingstone's major township of Yeppoon, which has a population of about 18,000. Both reports involved extensive engagement exercises with young people. A chance comparison of the two resulting documents – *Youth services in Livingstone Shire* and *Yeppoon living library* – showed a remarkable convergence of the expressed needs and desires of young people for a youth oriented facility that met their needs, regardless of its label. It was quickly realised that a combined youth services/library facility would deliver superior outcomes for both services. Thus was born the vision for the *Youth living library* which was adopted by council on 18 September 2003 and which led to the opening of *verbYL* ([www.verbyl.net.au](http://www.verbyl.net.au)) in December 2005.

## **Branding**

One of the critical success factors of *verbYL* has been the whole hearted application of branding and retail techniques in marketing and interior design as a way of gaining young people's interest and acceptance. The interest in branding and retail techniques was sparked initially by retail consultant John Stanley's presentation at the Mackay Queensland public librarians conference in June 2003, and a subsequent study tour with John Stanley and Fiona Emberton of New Zealand libraries by the Livingstone coordinator, library and arts services in July 2004.

The initial interior design of the space was developed with the assistance of a young interior designer with the multidisciplinary architectural firm Hassell. The detail of the fitout was further designed by the coordinator, library and arts services, who chose the black and silver Slatwall for the interior walls and the display window, the Slatwall gondolas for resources, and designed the service desk; and the youth development officer, who researched and selected the furnishings.

At all times the youth council was utilised as a reference group for decisions. The name *verbYL* was chosen from 115 entries in a competition open to young people, by the youth council. Young people explained their attraction to the name

it's misspelled, so that's cool. Verb is a doing word. And being verbal means saying something, having a voice for young people. The YL can stand for Youth Lounge or Youth Library.

A professional graphic artist, working in consultation with the youth council, developed the logo. An inspired young local painter completed the fitout with an imaginative interpretation of the colour palette set by the interior designer and the graphic artist, including the much remarked upon silver wallpapered tv feature wall. The refurbishment and fitout of the former ambulance station was achieved within a tight budget of around \$50,000.

The *verbYL* brand was reinforced with the use of the logo on marketing products such as specially printed membership cards, T-shirts, singlets, hats (in various styles) and pens, and has been readily adopted by young people.

*VerbYL* is used unselfconsciously by young people and the media as a brand, a place, and as an entity that has members.

### **Unique mix of service personnel**

*VerbYL* incorporates an innovative mix of service personnel. It is managed on a day to day basis jointly by the youth librarian and the youth worker, supported by other library and youth services staff. Managerial responsibility is shared between the coordinator of library and arts services, and the coordinator of community development. The youth librarian's primary focus is on resource selection and management, the circulation system, information and literacy skills, and the use and enjoyment of cultural media including reader advisory services (for print and electronic media). The youth worker is primarily focused on encouraging positive youth participation and interactions in the space, behaviour management, personal development and recreation programs, and confidential information and referral. It is a uniquely beneficial blend of the two disciplines. As far as is known, it is not utilised to the same extent in any other library service in the world.

### **Library services offered**

Through the engagement exercises, and the continuing consultation with young people, it became clear that there needed to be a new paradigm for library service in this unusual environment. It was to be – and is – a service that is oriented to the needs and expressed desires of young people. It

- is offered at times and days that suit them – *verbYL* is open weekends, evenings
- is responsive to youth culture and lifestyle in décor, services and resources
- is a place of their own, not tied to the activity norms of the main library – for example eating, talking, playing music very loudly, dancing, and mobile phones are all allowed
- provides equity of access to a wide range of cultural product important to youth – console games, internet gaming, messaging, music, books, magazines, graphic novels, comics, subscription tv
- removes barriers and restrictions – for example streamlined joining procedures, no fines, positive staff attitudes.

In addition *verbYL* provides opportunities for young people to become content creators as well as consumers, by providing industry standard creation software (Photoshop, Flash,

Dreamweaver); skills workshops and opportunities for creativity (software workshops, arts workshops); and a place to display and disseminate their creative product (shopfront window, e-zine).

It also assists young people with a study group one afternoon a week, where they can complete assignments or prepare job applications in a quiet and supportive environment. The youth librarian also presents a dedicated library session to disadvantaged and at risk youth who have been excluded from mainstream schooling, but who are pursuing their studies with the alternative campus Keppel Educational Pathways. Initially faced with the daunting task of introducing literacy activities to disaffected youth, the youth librarian tried the simple strategy of reading aloud to the young people. Slowly young people started to switch on to her approaches, and after six months or so were eager for the session and engaging in animated discussion. Readings from the works of Chopper Read (an infamous recent Australian criminal *ed*) have been the most popular so far.

Other library initiated programs are, or have included

- a book group meeting monthly
- a manga and anime group meeting monthly
- the e-zine *verbYLize*
- a book review group (young people have been invited by *Viewpoint* magazine to provide book reviews for publication)
- training courses in website design, digital photography, digital art, animation, and writing and poetry.

### **Youth services partnership**

The main advantage of the library services pairing with youth services is the ability for the library services to be a key presence in a welcoming space for all youth. Having provided a very funky 'cool' physical space, it was no surprise that it was instantly popular, with a current membership of over 600 young people. Young people en masse tend to be naturally boisterous, loud, often use expressive language, and are sometimes careless about equipment and furniture. Some present with more serious problems that affect their behaviour in the space. This is where the trained and skilled youth worker is a vital asset, from negotiating appropriate use of the equipment and space with young people, to assisting young people to link up to the external services and resources that they need.

In addition, the youth worker initiates many personal development and recreational activities for young people which allows the youth librarian to promote supplementary library resources, for example the youth librarian providing recipes and displays for a Mocktails alcohol education activity. By actively participating with young people in these programs, the librarian also establishes a presence and rapport with young people and is developing a recognition of and respect for the profession. It is hoped this will carry over into use of mainstream libraries.

Working in partnership with youth services also gives the youth librarian unprecedented casual access to a large group of young people, particularly those who were not previously library users. There are many incidental opportunities for the youth librarian to talk to young people about what they are reading or viewing, to introduce them to new resources or internet sites, and direct them to other sources of information. While there are many activities to choose from within *verbYL*, a significant number of young people take advantage of the comfortable seating to read a graphic novel or magazine. With 756 loans in 2006/07, lending of print material was not high. However the 4,603 loans of other cultural resources such as console games, dvds and music cds, and inhouse use of the internet, games, print items, and 50-100 attendees per session were a significant part of the library's engagement with young people.

### Future challenges

Having struck a winning formula, the near future is one of consolidation and extension of services. There is a need to continually keep the physical image fresh and vibrant with the purchase of new equipment and furniture. Similarly, there will be a significant challenge in maintaining an

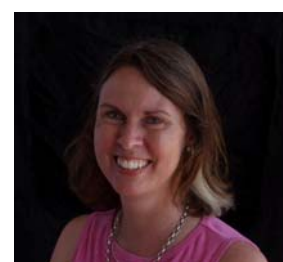
exciting offering of services and activities to current and new members of *verbYL*.

Many library services have expressed an interest in this model of service for their own communities. The vital piece of advice is that while the physical trappings and branding are important, what really makes such a space work is the equal partnership of library professionals and human service professionals and the unique service offering and opportunities that this presents. It is also important to note that not all young people are attracted to, or are comfortable with, the *verbYL* environment, and therefore it is important to maintain a more conventional young adult section and service within the mainstream branch libraries. While there is potential for success with a 'build it and they will come' approach, longterm success particularly depends on engaging young people in the development and ongoing management of the service.



---

Debra Burn BA GradDipLibSci GradDipLocalGovtMgmt worked at the State Library of Queensland from 1976 to 1986, and was college librarian, Rockhampton Tafe from 1986-1988. She has been coordinator, library and arts services at Livingstone Shire Council Qld since 1988. Address: Livingstone Shire Council PO Box 600 Yeppoon 4703 tel(07)49393433 fax(07)49383380 email ylib@livingstone.qld.gov.au





Copyright of APLIS is the property of Auslib Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.