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Sesame Street exec hypes reading

November
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Gary Knell, president and chief executive officer of the [Sesame Street Workshop](#), (shown on the right in photo) believes libraries and children's television programmers should work side by side to encourage reading and learning. They each have the attention of parents and educators, and cooperatively should find new ways to work on their common goal. Knell spoke at this month's annual meeting of the [Westchester Library System](#) (Shiobhan Reardon, the executive director of the system, standing with Knell in the photo). He talked about technology changes in children's television programming and public libraries.



By way of explanation, the Westchester Library System is a cooperative, resource sharing, agency of 38 public libraries serving Westchester County communities. It is one of the 23 public library systems serving New York state's public libraries, and was established in 1958. It has been at the forefront of library innovation when it began providing a centralized computer resource of all library system holdings, and shared information databases and online services.

Sesame Workshop was founded in 1968 as the Children's Television Workshop. Initially, it was designed to help children from low-income families. Sesame Street's worldwide mission now includes productions in South Africa, Russia, China and Egypt. The Workshop develops educational content for television, radio, books, magazines and interactive media. Sesame Street Workshop is available to library users through books and DVDs with 150 titles produced last year. Thousands of titles have been produced in the 40 years of the show.

Knell has a bachelor's degree in political science and journalism from the University of California at Los Angeles and a law degree from Loyola University. As managing director of Manager Media

International based in Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore, he oversaw the development of a monthly business magazine Asia, Inc., the daily Asian-based newspaper Asia Times and several trade publications. He is a former senior vice president and general counsel at WNET/Channel 13 in New York and was counsel to the U.S. Senate Judiciary and Governmental Affairs Committees. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

We asked Knell, a Mt. Kisco resident and not incidentally a public library fan, to share his vision of the future of Sesame Street Workshop and public libraries. Here is some of what he said:

I see from your bio that you were a political science major in college, have a law degree and have held some influential governmental positions. How does your work on Sesame Street Workshop coordinate with all that?

I've been involved with public service for my entire career. I worked as a lawyer on the Senate Judiciary Committee and I have worked for newspapers in Hong Kong.

The idea is to use television, which can reach so many, to humanize the other side from ethnic conflict in Kosovo to Israeli and Palestinian struggles. ... Children through the power of Sesame Street have been opened to other people of different races and ethnicities. Understanding people from other cultures and backgrounds is more important today, and especially more important for our children.

How did it come that you spoke at the Westchester Library System's annual meeting?

Shiobhan Reardon, the executive director of the system, invited me. We are working with the Urban Libraries Council, (an organization of large library systems) and began talking about Sesame Street, libraries and the Westchester system.

I hope to visit all 38 (Westchester) libraries and have been to one-third of the them already.

My main point was talking about the parallel challenges from a nonprofit point of view and help the librarians redefine their approach as technology and how we get information changes. The web has forced em to redefine what their services are to the public.

Why did you think it would be a good opportunity?

I am a big believer in libraries. I have been a lifelong user of libraries ...

People get more isolated in their computer-driven sanctuaries....Libraries are a hub of activity, they are where people go to get information, but not always in a social way.

What are some of the successful Sesame Workshop strategies that can be applied to libraries as well as other public services?

It is the whole idea of making information and learning more accessible to kids who may come from economically disadvantaged households and who don't have the technology. We will be re-launching The Electric Company, a hit in the 1970's, for 6- to 9 year olds. We would like to work with WLS and other systems throughout the county on community outreach. (This is expected to including) coordinating materials at the libraries and training librarians to use the tool kit.

Looking ahead, we will continue to break new ground in the next year with Sesame Street co-productions in Bangladesh, Kosovo, Japan and a pilot program in Afghanistan.

Are there any tips you picked up from conversations with WLS staff or from visits to your local library?

There is a general recognition that (libraries) are on a similar track of change. Rather than hide from it, we all need to embrace it. I felt my role was to be a booster of the strategies and future partner as we

struggle as a country and a state with reading levels that are not were they should be.

Any final thoughts?

My main message here is to continue on the path of change and encourage reading without turning technology into the enemy. There are ways to do that. Technology is here with us whether we like it or not... Children are born into this baby-Einstein world. We need to work with it and not pretend it is not here.

Thank you for your time.





Thank you.

As a follow-up, Reardon comments on the choice of Knell to speak at the annual WLS meeting:

The reason WLS chose Gary Knell is due to the fact that he speaks rather eloquently about the importance of nonprofits remaining relevant to their respective constituencies. We wanted to make sure that the people who are in critical library leadership positions heard Gary's message and took to heart the importance of libraries remaining relevant in the community, to anticipate change and to be able to respond efficiently and effectively to the needs of a changing community. Sesame Workshop has gone through a number of transformations in their 40 year history in order to remain relevant. And, because libraries and Sesame Workshop share similar audiences we thought his message would be well received. It's important for libraries to go to where the children and teens are – either physically or virtually.

This entry was posted on Friday, November 23rd, 2007 at 5:57 pm by [Barbara Nackman](#).

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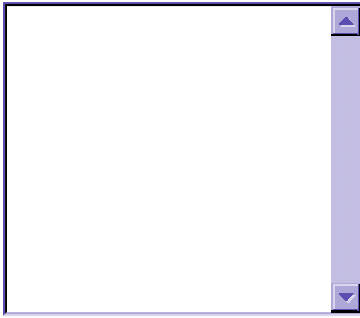
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Staff writer Barbara Livingston Nackman admits she doesn't like to stroll past a library or bookstore without stopping inside. And, when visiting someone's home she rarely walks by a bookshelf without glancing at the titles. She shares her passion for fiction, non-fiction, poetry and short stories by bringing books discussions online and exploring the local literati scene.

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About the author



A municipal reporter for The Journal News since 1997, [Barbara Livingston Nackman](#) has covered local governments, events and breaking news from many communities. She began her journalism career by writing for bookselling and library publications. As a suburban mother, she made sure her two sons, now 23 and 21, had bookshelves and reading chairs in their rooms and library cards way before they had driver's licenses. Her editors have now found an outlet for all those book-related stories she pitches and her husband hopes she gains an interest in reading historical non-fiction.

Well, maybe if it's about Benjamin Franklin and the Free Library of Philadelphia. [READ MORE](#)

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