

Testimony to a People / New Hughes library nourishes black culture [QUEENS Edition]

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Three decades after its opening in Corona, the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center finally has received new legs to stand upon: a \$6 million, 24,000-square-foot building that feeds a community's need for knowledge on black history and literature.

The facility, which opened Nov. 9 at 100-01 Northern Blvd., testifies to residents' efforts to establish and keep up to date a library that reflects the black community of Corona, in the most ethnically diverse county in the United States.

"I'm elated, overjoyed and extremely grateful," Grace Lawrence, who has worked on the library's advisory committee for more than two decades, said of the new facility. "A group of activists dared to dream of this library more than 30 years ago, and over the years, it's become the jewel of the community."

Since the center, named for the Harlem Renaissance poet, opened in the 1960s, two blocks from its present Corona location, it has attracted an increasing number of patrons each year. With the state's largest circulating black culture collection, the only such public collection in the metropolitan area, the library has become a resource for students throughout the five boroughs.

"It has accomplished its mission because it has survived," said Andrew Jackson, library executive director. "Historically, African- Americans are not raised to read-in fact, it was illegal [in slave- holding states] for black people to read throughout the Civil War. We've found that the way to attract people not conditioned to using a library is to give them resources to learn about their history."

Years of steadily increasing patronage came to the attention of the New York City Council and to Queens Borough President Claire Shulman's office. In 1991, the two groups decided to finance a larger facility for the Langston Hughes Community Library.

The new facility boasts twice the space of the former one, with a 225-seat auditorium, 20 computers and a classroom to house the Homework Assistance Program. About 90 children participate in this after-school program every day; the sessions provide registered teachers and tutors to assist first- through seventh-grade students.

The spacious, two-story building also is accommodating expansion of the library's Black Heritage Reference Center and the addition of a video and music collection.

"We're proud of having the only library in the area, if not in the entire East Coast, where you can check out these materials," Jackson said.

In the mid-1960s, a time when few libraries in the United States housed a black reading collection, the concept for the Langston Hughes center was hatched by residents who thought the theme library should be state-funded, but run by the community.

Opening in 1969 on the ground level of the former Woolworth Building, at 102-09 Northern Blvd., the Corona library became the first community-run branch in the United States. Under the supervision of a dedicated local board, and the Queens Borough Public Library system, it flourished.

"The visionaries were the ones who created the dream, and we were able to make it a reality," said Lawrence. "We became the dream- keepers of the library."

For almost 20 years, the library had operated as a state experimental project, receiving funding for its innovation and creativity. But in 1987, following talks with state officials and documentation of its high usage in the community, the library became part of the 63-branch Queens Borough Public Library system.

Today, it has become a hangout for Corona youth as well as a center for research.

Such young professionals as Lawrence Carrol, 22, come daily to the Langston Hughes library to browse through books they would be unable to access anywhere else.

"Being that I'm black, I like to read up on my history," said Carrol, a Corona resident who works for an Internet start-up company. "It's not a very big library, but it has such a large selection of black authors. For the young ones, it's nice that they have this material so they can be in touch with themselves."

Other patrons, such as 27-year-old Cassandra Clark, are just discovering the library. Clark, who lives in Long Island City and studies psychology at York College, recently checked out books on the poet Langston Hughes for a research paper.

"This is a convenient place to come when you need information about these things," Clark said. "It's nice to know that this is here because you can do all your research in the same place."

Kathy Chu is a freelance writer.

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