

AUSTIN'S WINS 2009 COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AWARD

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At the beginning of the decade, rapid growth in the southeast quadrant of Fort Collins left a large portion of the city's child population without a neighborhood library. Lu Benke, the Lead Librarian for children's services, sought a non-library location for children's story-hour. Proposed sites weren't a good fit with budget and time constrictions. Then Benke found Austin's on Harmony road.

"They had no reservations about accommodating the library's needs—all for free," Benke stated in her letter nominating the local eatery for the award. The Austin's staff was "warm and welcoming from the very beginning. They are truly our community partner."

Steve Taylor, co-owner of the Austin's restaurants, says, "Alan Jantzen [operations manager for the Austin's concept] pushed for this program and made it go. It was great to see all those kids enjoying books week after week."

Because Austin's is a busy restaurant, there were occasional adjustments. Benke recalls, "One Friday, the painters had not finished painting the ceiling trim in the usual storytime area, so the restaurant staff cleared the tall tables and high stools from another area to make room for us."

Storytimes were held non-stop from October 2004 until the opening of the Council Tree Library this spring. Austin's rolled out the red carpet every Friday morning, opening the doors early and providing coffee for the adults and balloons for the children. Attendance for the two weekly storytimes averaged from 50 to 100, including children, their parents, grandparents and babysitters. Storytimes at the new library branch are very popular, but the families of southeast Fort Collins remember mornings at Austin's, says Benke, "Customers are still mentioning their appreciation."

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