

THE AJAX PUBLIC LIBRARY beyond books

BY MONIKA MORAVAN

"I came to Canada in December," laughs Cindy Poon, Manager of Public Services at Ajax Public Library. "Coming off the airplane it wasn't so bad, but walking out the airport doors – what did I get myself into!"

Like many immigrants, Poon came to Canada as a child with her family. Being born and raised in Hong Kong gave her the advantage of understanding English but there were still struggles with language.

"We had the grammar, the spelling but didn't speak it outside of class," she says. "I really had to learn to speak it."

That's why Poon and Sarah Dodge, Information Services Coordinator at Ajax Public Library are so passionate about the programs they have available for newcomers to Canada and those looking to learn another language or experience different cultures.

Movies, music, board games, networking, multilingual data bases, DVDs, and yes, they even have those things made up of paper with covers – books.

"You can be an active library user and never take out a single book," says Dodge. "But lots of people still do."

The most popular language for non-English library book loans in Ajax is Chinese, thanks in part to the popular "Swim, Play, Read" program held in conjunction with the adjacent Ajax Memorial Pool.

Parents commented they are happy that the kids are swimming

but also coming in right after to learn another meaningful skill. They are often accompanied by their parents.

"Those comments are from the Chinese community," says Poon. She explains the difference between Mandarin and Cantonese: "I speak in Cantonese dialect and we read Traditional Chinese. People who speak Mandarin read Simplified Chinese."

See, you've already learned something from the library without walking through the doors or logging on to the website.

For those who'd rather watch the big screen than flip through chapter after chapter, "Movies without Borders" fits the bill.

"These are cross-cultural, educational movies for people to learn from other cultures," says Poon. The program is in partnership with Community Development Council Durham (CDCD). It is one of the most popular programs and has a healthy mix of core followers and the culturally curious. Snacks specific to the culture of the movie are provided.

"It's really to give a flavour for the culture," says Dodge. "That's a really important part because you're giving them an idea of the milieu the film is a part of."

Food is a natural conversation topic and many a friendship has begun over bites of samosa or dipping dim sum.

Another program that started out to serve the needs of one ethnic community has attracted



VOLUNTEERS

DID YOU KNOW?

The English Conversation circle is so popular, the Ajax Library is getting requests to offer it in French, Spanish, and Mandarin.

To volunteer, phone
(905) 683-4000

new participants. Senior Board Games started with a group of Chinese seniors looking for a safe, comfortable, and accessible meeting place.

"It's a great natural marriage with seniors for the library to offer them a space," says Poon. At first the group met to sit, talk, and read but soon wanted something more

active.

The library and Durham Chinese Canadian Culture Centre (DCCC – only three Cs – four is too many!) came up with the idea of Chinese board games. Poon came in one Saturday and knew the program was a success when she saw a Caucasian learning how to play Chinese dominoes and speak a few words of the language with fellow gamers.

Dodge credits organizations such as DCCC, CDCD, and Durham District Catholic School Board for their key role in spreading the word about these events and actively developing new programs, ranging from Tai Chi to practicing for the Canadian citizenship test.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the ever popular English Conversation Circle has

earned high praise indeed.

"We're getting requests for French, Spanish and Mandarin circles," says Poon. "I need to find more volunteers to coordinate those!"

Seeking help in a foreign language can be daunting but the Ajax library found a solution. Patrons can point to their language on a pamphlet kept at the main desk and a staff member will call a number to an interpreter.

This is the same service used by 911. Not surprising, because when it comes to communication, the modern library is a linguistic lifeline.

For a current list of program schedules, call the Ajax Library main branch at 905.683.4000 or visit the website: ajaxlibrary.ca