

# The Marathon Library, 10 Years Strong



*I don't think I fully understood the meaning of community until my husband and I moved to Marathon about a year and a half ago. He and I both grew up in what I used to consider small towns – San Angelo and College Station, respectively – and didn't really appreciate the efforts of the institutions that connect the people who live there and make those places special. After graduating high school, I immediately moved to Boston to fulfill my cliché teenage dream of getting out and (at long last!) finding some culture.*

BY MARY BETH SCHAEFER



You couldn't know the library's reach by looking at it. The smallest accredited library in Texas, it's about the size of your average one-bedroom apartment. But in 2022 alone, the library served more than 13,000 patrons. It hosts hundreds of programs and events annually, from children's reading, science, and theater programs to lecture series and book binding classes. Our little cinderblock sanctuary houses a collection of thousands of books and DVDs, catalogued online for easy browsing. Visitors can also access computers, wi-fi, and other services. The library even has a 3-D printer.

I was enchanted by the city. I remember walking across a bridge over the Charles River by myself for the first time, and in the shadow of the Boston skyline, I'd never felt so small. I went to school just outside the city but spent most of my weekends wandering around downtown, learning to navigate its old streets and discovering places I could eat for cheap. But every so often, I had days when I was less awe-struck and painfully homesick, when I couldn't escape the noise and the crowds and the cold. On those days, I had one place I'd go to find some solace and comfort: the public library.

The Boston Public Library meant more to me than the stacks, though. In fact, I don't recall ever actually checking out a book. It was about being able to go and sit in this space without needing a real reason to be there. I didn't have to buy a t-shirt, drink a beer or eat a meal – all of which I could hardly afford anyway – to pass the hours there. The library belonged to everyone. It was quiet but bustling. I found solitude but never felt alone. At the time, nothing was more precious to me than the warmth – physical and metaphorical – afforded by the library.

Fast forward to today, 15 years or so later, and I'm in a place that, in many ways, couldn't differ more from the Boston metro area. Far West Texas does make me feel small, living under the expanse of sky at the feet of nearby mountains, but I have an acute sense of significance and purpose here that comes with being one of Marathon's 400-some-odd residents. I feel like I can contribute something and help build on what's here. I've gained an appreciation for all the efforts, the institutions that connect the people who live here and make it special. These are the things that make us more than just a blip on a map – they're what make us a community. And in Marathon, one of the

most important of these efforts and institutions is our very own public library.

Even so, these are just facts and figures you can turn up with a quick Google search. What's harder to articulate is the impact the library has on the people who live here, especially the kids. The library might be the place they first see a picture of a gorilla, get a chapter book, or use a coding program. They build confidence through acting in plays and building robots. And I guarantee they'll always remember the faces of the people who greet them at the door – the folks who helped show them just how big the world is – no one's more than Director Dara Cavness.

As someone relatively new to town, I have trouble picturing Marathon without this community touchpoint, but its demise was a real possibility only a decade ago. After the library spent years as a branch of the Alpine library system, budget cuts brought it to the brink of closure. That's when community members like Erin Albright, now president of the library's board of directors, rallied to keep the doors open, taking steps to build the Marathon Public Library as a separate entity governed by its own board. In 2013, the library acquired its status as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and received its certificate of formation from the state. This year, Marathon commemorated the library's 10-year milestone as a stand-alone, home-grown organization, and we had plenty to celebrate aside from the anniversary – namely, the success of a multi-million-dollar campaign to expand the library and revitalize the museum next door.

The expansion efforts, aptly named the "Heart of Marathon," started in 2019 but gained momentum in the past two years. The library secured a lifetime lease from Brewster County for both the library and museum in 2022. Also in 2022, the campaign

received a \$1 million grant from the Brown Foundation of Dallas, which served as a catalyst for fundraising. As of December 2023, when the library hosted its annual Christmas open house and a community conversation about the project, the campaign had raised more than \$2 million of the estimated \$2.5 million needed to expand the library and revamp the museum. Groundbreaking is expected in mid-2024. (Those who attended the open house got to see the footprint of the expansion outlined in Christmas lights.)

The library's growth will help accommodate the demand for its services and flourishing programs. What's more, the project will give new life to Marathon's town square, a city block that's also home to the community center, fire department and justice center. The plans include covered porches and a community room for people to gather and collaborate. The renovation of the museum, an adobe schoolhouse built in 1888, will allow visitors to learn about the Trans-Pecos region, including its topography, flora and fauna, people, and history.

If I haven't yet convinced you of how mighty our tiny library is, I'll leave you with a couple recent accolades. In 2021, the library was a finalist for the National Medal for Museum and Library Service by the Institute for Museum and Library Services, an honor that was given to just 15 libraries nationwide. In 2023, it was one of two libraries on the Library Journal's Best Small Library in America 2023 Honorable Mentions list.

The Marathon Public Library is nationally recognized because it's so much more than books; it's a lynchpin in our community. It's a place for us to come together, to learn, to hide from and then discover the world. I can't wait to see what we can do with a space that reflects the library's outsized impact. ■