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Photo courtesy of Pottsboro Library

POTTSBORO LIBRARY TEAMS UP FOR ESPORTS

by Michele Chan Santos

Thanks to a \$49,657 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the local library in Pottsboro, Texas, is now home to an esports team made up of Pottsboro High students, coached by nearby college gamers.

A town of about 2,500 people in Northeast Texas, Pottsboro sits near the Texas-Oklahoma border, close to Lake Texoma. The project is the brainchild of Pottsboro Library Director Dianne Connery.

"In the library, we want to go where the kids are, to go where their interests are," she said. "We can work on learning skills using esports as a platform for learning. Especially in a town where a lot of people aren't connected (online) the way they would be in other places, we want to put them on a level playing field with kids from other cities."

Esports are organized, multi-player video game competitions. Teams hold tryouts and have players who specialize in certain positions; they compete against other schools and organizations.

BETTER ACCESS FOR EVERYONE

In addition to energizing local students — Pottsboro High has about 450 students, 55 of whom expressed interest in the esports team — the grant is improving the prospects of many people in town, thanks to the upgraded computer equipment and faster Wi-Fi speeds now offered in the library. Before, the upload speed was a sluggish 18 mbps (megabits per second), and now it's a zippy 500 mbps (a good home Wi-Fi speed, in comparison, is above 25 mbps.)

"With 500 mbps, everyone can do what they need to be doing," Connery said. Multiple patrons can use the computers in the library, or bring in their own laptops or other devices. The library keeps the Wi-Fi up and available 24 hours a day. A local Eagle Scout built and installed benches outside. Now, even when the library is closed, people can bring their own devices to use the free Wi-Fi while seated outside.

"People here don't have technology access the way they do in other cities," Connery explained. "Our library has become a catalyst for better things for the community."

The Pottsboro Library is now open from 1-5 p.m. on Saturdays solely for esports. The students needed time to practice when they didn't have to worry about keeping the room quiet for other patrons, Connery said.

The grant allowed the library to purchase 10 gaming PCs, which are available to patrons when the team is not using them.

LEARNING TRUST AND COMMUNICATION

The team's mentors attend Austin College in Sherman, located about 12 miles from Pottsboro, where Dr. Brett Boessen is an associate professor of media studies, and the communication, media and theater department chair. He's also the director of the esports program at the college.

Electra Coffman, sophomore, will be coaching the Pottsboro library team, along with Chloe Schnaible, a junior. Both play for the Austin College esports team. Coffman specializes in *League of Legends*, and Schnaible plays *Overwatch*.

The benefits of competing in esports are similar to the benefits derived from more traditional sports, Boessen said. Team-based video game play teaches students "cooperation, leadership, trust and communication," he said.

Casy Blanton is a career tech teacher at Pottsboro High School. He oversees the esports program from the high school end, working as a liaison between Connery and the students.

"The kids are really jumping after it, they want to know more and more about it, they're excited to learn about the games and game play," Blanton said. With 55 students wanting to be on the newly formed team, there will be competitive tryouts for spots.

Esports familiarizes students with computers and networks, and gives them teammates, versus just playing video games alone at home, Blanton and Boessen said. And like other competitive sports, there are various ways for more students to become involved, whether making videos of the game play, broadcasting the games live online, or doing commentary for the games. Some students will be creating graphic designs to support the team, for example, while others can serve as managers.

Boessen said he was impressed with the turnout and energy at the esports' program's kickoff event at the Pottsboro library. "Beforehand, I thought, how many kids would go to the library on a Saturday?" he said. "But there were easily two dozen teenagers ready to go for this Super Smash Bros. tournament. That multi-use room was packed."

In the esports world, multi-player teams compete at tournaments and play popular games such as *Overwatch*, which is played as a six-on-six match. Each player selects from a roster of more than 30 characters, known as "heroes." Each hero has a unique skill set. More than 40 million people internationally have played *Overwatch* since its inception.

The Pottsboro Library team will begin engaging in *Overwatch* competition this spring, Boessen said, and will expand to have teams competing in other games as well. The team will be part of the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF). Both Coffman and Schnaible can coach players in *Overwatch*, as well as *League of Legends* and other games.

A HIDDEN GEM

Both Blanton and Boessen say Connery's energy and enthusiasm, as well as her innovative ideas, are what make the Pottsboro Library an integral part of the town. Connery said she has coffee meetings "just to talk to the community about what matters to them."

"Dianne is amazing," Blanton said of Connery. "The library is a hidden gem. There is so much there." Blanton's four-year-old son, Jett, "wants to go up to the library every day." Jett enjoys playing with the builder toys and the imagination toys especially. "They have so many resources that you wouldn't expect to have there."

Connery wants other librarians to know that an esports program is doable. "Esports are scalable to different libraries, it can look like a lot of different things in a lot of different libraries," she said. NASEF, has many free resources available at www.esportsfed.org.

The library's esports team "is a great opportunity, a huge source of buzz and positivity," Blanton said. "Kids from every walk of student life want to participate."

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