



Authorless Events

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There were so many intriguing ideas and examples of authorless events at the eponymous session that one could be forgiven for thinking authors might not be so essential for bookstore events on behalf of their titles.

Valerie Koehler, owner of Blue Willow Bookshop, Houston, Tex., praised the value of children's storytimes, which she tries to keep "casual and simple." The staff "works hard to learn kids' names and ask them questions because over the years they are our goodwill ambassadors in the community." The store continues to stage the weekly events through Christmas. "People think we're crazy, but we don't want to disappoint anyone."

The store also hosts scouts meetings. One advantage: "we get parents in here." And if the parents don't come in, the store gives the scouts coupons that families can bring back later. Similarly the American Girl Club meets regularly at the store. One staff member "embraces" this and helps the girls talk about "being friends and not be mean to each other."

During the summer, Blue Willow "ramps it up for kids," offering a Wednesday afternoon program after day camps with readings and more. On Thursdays, Blue Willow holds game meisters, the store's "most popular event of the summer," at which participants play board games on the floor. One side benefit: staff members learn how to play many games and "use that knowledge at holiday times," Koehler noted.

For adults, the store has a weekly "little wine thing" every Friday at 5 p.m. "It's not fine wine," Koehler said, and "we don't even know what we're going to do," but "everyone has a really good time." Even people who don't go think "we're awesome for doing this."

Once a year, Blue Willow invites members of the more than 50 book clubs registered with it to "share with each other the books they've read." Called Bibliotherapy, the evening includes wine, too.

In a similar vein, Blue Willow hosts teacher/educator events at which, among other things, it holds trivia games. These events, she emphasized, are important for introducing teachers to the store.

Koehler pointed out a major advantage of having many regularly scheduled events, particularly storytimes: "When a [children's] author approaches you about reading a book, you can slip them into story time. Often their contacts will pack the event."

Blue Willow also has a kind of event outreach: "When we see people doing interesting things in the community," Koehler said, "we invite them to do an event with us." In addition, the store works with other businesses on complementary events. For example, the store sold "a ton of cookbooks" at an event held by a deli across the street. "I didn't recognize any of the people," Koehler said. "It opened up a lot of marketing for us."

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The show stopper, as occurs whenever she describes her store's activities, was Collette Morgan, owner of Wild Rumpus Books, Minneapolis, Minn. The store holds a range of events in several "categories": animal, science, music, artistic and random. "The sky's the limit with authorless events," Morgan said. "You can do whatever you want. Most events that we do are for our own entertainment. Many appeal to kids and adults at the same time." Herewith a sampling of Wild Rumpus events, with Morgan's comments:

- Mounted police come to the store with "full-war regalia" and talk about the training horses go through.
- K-9 patrol. "How many kids don't want to see the police come with big padded arms and have dogs attack them?"
- Raptor Center. "We invite them to bring stuff in." One caveat concerning store pets, Morgan stressed: "Put the little furries away or you will have a totally different kind of event."
- Christmas photo opportunities with goats.
- A pet show and pet parade through the neighborhood with a band or horse leading and wagons for pets that can't walk.
- A beekeeping workshop, featuring a beekeeper with hive and smoker. Another caveat: "It's not a good idea if the store has a smoke detector."
- A sheep shearer.
- Live turkeys on Thanksgiving, which is "the No. 1 way to turn kids into vegetarians."
- An insect wrangler.
- A rodeo queen with a horse and fake calf head for roping.
- Chemists from universities and high schools. "We like to blow stuff up."
- A demonstration of cryogenics by 3M scientists. "They threw a frozen tennis ball onto the floor that broke into millions of pieces."
- A mummified Barbie workshop.
- Musical instrument repair, which involves taking apart instruments.
- Creature from the Black Lagoon, which involves "scientists, microscopes, lake water and the fecal count of swimming water. It's gross but fascinating."
- An egg-decorating workshop, which involves hardboiling 200 eggs that night before.
- Jazz bands from the local high school and garage bands. "They bring their family and friends."
- Street musicians.
- Klezmer bands.
- A zombie prom for Halloween, which called for a "dig-up-a-deadbeat" date.
- Bagpipe demonstrations. "Every kid secretly wants to learn bagpipes at a certain point. They're very loud, so warn the neighbors. It becomes a truly community event."
- A your-junk-is-my-treasure swap meet, which can include things from the store's lost and found.
- A get-in-touch-with-your-inner-dimwit event.