

# Director's Report for February 26, 2026

## **Cumberland & 2<sup>nd</sup> Park**

Our fundraising has gained momentum from a \$50,000 matching donor in the past month (more on this below). We have gotten an enthusiastic green light from the city of Little Rock and ARDOT to plant five larger trees (2 tulip poplar, 3 black cherry trees recommended to me by our master naturalists) in locations that are deemed compatible by the city and its consultants with their longer-range plans for the park. Unfortunately, finding a source for 8" caliper black cherry trees has proven more difficult than anticipated. One source had said they had these for us before I asked for permission from the city/ARDOT but then couldn't deliver and I got approval. We have lined up the tulip poplars from a tree farm in Georgia that they will ship here in about 10 days. To give you an idea of their size, the root ball is 70 inches wide, and they weigh a combined 8500 pounds. We have a local landscape firm ready to take shipment here and get them in the ground by April 24, Arbor Day. The window for planting in time to survive the summer heat is closing soon but local experts say this is not too late. The lot has been vacant since 2022. Planting these two trees soon will symbolize progress toward a functioning park, boost our credibility with potential donors, and provide a little shade this summer. We'll add signage touting other coming enhancements – the gardens, programming pads, and a pathway.

## **State Library Funding Resumes**

At a special meeting on March 2, the state library board voted to approve the quarterly distribution of \$1.37M in state library aid. The board had tabled a motion to approve this distribution at its regularly quarterly meeting in February after some board members voiced concerns about the status of new rules for the recipients of state aid. The board voted on the distribution following a discussion about the still pending rulemaking process. CALS share of these funds is about \$130,000 and we have now received that state aid.

## **The Library and A.I.**

As you know from my statement about my plans to leave CALS in the fall, I see issues surrounding artificial intelligence as one of the challenges facing libraries and their patrons down the road. Some of these are broader societal and moral issues; others are more routine. I have asked Ellen Samples to initiate a conversation with our programmers about how CALS might help patrons sort through some of the smaller aspects of this technology that are already affecting their lives, perhaps in ways they don't yet appreciate. Just last week I was involved in conversations with people talking about changing settings on certain apps they use to prevent every email to and from her from being read by a bot. If that is in fact happening, a lot of our patrons may not know it or know how to disable that function. Subsequently, someone told me about preparing a public presentation and using A.I. to draft her talk from an outline of points she wanted to make to her audience. Tell us how you think the library can help people learn to navigate A.I.'s opportunities and hazards of A.I. efficiently and safely.

## **Library Square Books**

Volunteers Walter May and Sam Ledbetter have already logged a lot of time measuring and cutting (in that order!) prototypes for our shelving in the new used books store that we hope to have open by June. Gonzalo's staff has built panels over some of the masonry to which the handmade wooden shelves will be attached. After the February board meeting, the ADG correctly reported that I had said the store could be open on April 14. As it turns out, that date was wildly optimistic and showed how little I know about woodworking. Early June now seems more realistic, though in this interim period, Development staff are hosting several pop-up used book sales around the community – including one at White Water Tavern last month and one on the campus of UA Little Rock on Earth Day. This is going to be a great addition to the neighborhood and an inviting place for book lovers to shop. We want to keep finding new owners for some of the large quantities of used books donated to CALS.

## **Roberts Archive Exhibition Space**

This is the area formerly occupied by the gallery and gift store that we closed to make room for the temporary library during the renovation of Main. The staff at Roberts has a timeline for opening this space for public enjoyment by September 16, 2026. Between now and then they will be working on concept designs for exhibits and then designing and developing the content for those exhibits. They envision physical exhibits for the Japanese American Internment collection, and interpretative pieces about the USCT from Civil War era artifacts we have in the CALS collection. The latter would give way in 2027 to a display of some artifacts from the devastation in Arkansas from the 1927 Flood. Other possible exhibits would be a photo corner featuring rotating displays from the Butler Center's extensive photograph collection. Roberts librarians also want to have rotating digital exhibits and a "community corner" for digital exhibits. There would also be something called an Ideum Map Table which will feature our map collection.

## **Succession Process**

Karama and I have discussed the process for finding my successor. She will address this at the meeting. The ADG reported my plans to leave the library this fall [here](#). Last week Dustin shared with the Pulaski County Quorum Court and others his ideas about what he wanted the process for choosing a new CALS director to entail. The ADG reported that [here](#). Dustin sent a copy of his letter to the board via the CALS Trustees email address. Ray shared that with you.

## **Program Updates**

April is known for a few celebratory moments that are popular and relevant in the library world. National Library Week occurs every April (this year April 19-25), and it's also National Poetry Month. Several years ago, CALS took another April holiday, Earth Day, and expanded our acknowledgement of it to a month-long

celebration. All those things converge in our plans for this April as we are implementing a NEA Big Read around the Ross Gay poetry collection *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, which draws upon themes of garden, growing, and nature in connection with joy, grief, and sorrow. Successful Big Read grants include a slate of programs and activities that are meant to inspire meaningful conversations, celebrate local creativity, elevate a wide variety of voices and perspectives, and build stronger connections in the community. We are giving away 675 copies of the book in addition to programs that connect with these themes for a variety of age groups across the system including at two community gardens. The most notable, of course, is the author event with Ross Gay, a part of our Spring Speaker Series, on April 10 at 6:30 pm. You can see the full slate of public programs [here](#). In addition to the public events, we are sharing Big Read themed programs with two of our partner organizations whose clientele often lack access to the library including Our Club, the afterschool program at Our House, and Jericho Way, the city's day shelter and resource center.

## **Development**

Library Giving Day, a nationwide fundraising day in support of libraries, was April 1. This year, we encouraged donors to give in support of the greenspace across 2<sup>nd</sup> St. from the Main Library between Cumberland Street and River Market Avenue. (As of the writing of this report on the morning of April 1, we've raised \$23,000 in support of park improvements since we received permission from the City Board in December to fundraise.) Donors are also able to make unrestricted gifts on Library Giving Day or give in support of other library programs of their choice. By the time the board meets, Library Giving Day will be over, but it's not too late to give. Thanks to the Judith K. Faust Memorial Fund, donations to CALS Park up to \$50,000 will be matched until June 1.

Another highlight since our last meeting: In March we applied to join the Urban Libraries Council's Civic Makers Lab, "a grant and peer-learning program that equips librarians to serve as civic learning facilitators." (ULC is an organization of about 180 libraries in the US and Canada that we subscribe to because it facilitates excellent peer-to-peer learning opportunities for our library leaders.) On April 1, ULC [announced](#) that CALS was one of 10 libraries nationwide to be accepted into this program. Danielle Afsordeh, Community Outreach Archivist & Programs Coordinator at Roberts Library, will represent CALS in the learning cohort and lead the programs associated with the 18-month project. Our selection includes a \$15,000 grant to support programming centered on civic learning, with a focus on young adult patrons ages 18-24. In addition to CALS receiving the programming grant, we will receive reimbursement for Danielle to travel for two in-person convenings hosted by ULC. I'm grateful to Hannah Saulters and Danielle for working on this.

On March 30, the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette [published a nice piece](#) by Daniel McFadin highlighting the CALS Foundation's memorial funds that purchase books for the library's collection. Daniel approached Tameka with questions about the funds after noticing a bookplate in a book at the library, and Leslie Blanchard and Eliza Borné sat down with him to share how people in our community honor their loved ones through these donations.

Finally, April 1 marks the beginning of Volunteer Appreciation Month. We'd like to thank all the members of the CALS Board for your service to your library, especially as we enter a period of leadership transition. Your attention and participation enhance so much of what we do at the library, and we are grateful for your time and engagement.

## **Communications**

We hosted Midday Mix featuring DJ Ally Lynn on the rooftop on March 31. Between 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m., around 270 people entered the rooftop, including some of our partners who work for the City of Little Rock, AMFA, and LRCVB. They all now know that CALS rooftop is a public jewel. The team at Boulevard Bread

also shared that the cafe was busy before and during the two-hour event. We answered several questions about rentals, programming, and library services and encouraged anyone who didn't have a card to stop by the circulation desk before leaving.

We're celebrating National Library Week and Children's Day on April 25. The National Library Week celebration will take place from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Main Library in partnership with the North Little Rock Public Library System, featuring face painting, crafts, and food trucks. Children's Day (El Día del Niño) at the Maumelle Library will be held from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., celebrating the day with a hands-on craft led by artist Vicente Yáñez and a workshop for adults.

Other Communications projects include promoting the CALS Big Read and preparing for the launch of the redesigned website later this month. The redesign focuses on improving functionality and meeting updated accessibility standards.

### **Circulation and Traffic**

After the thoughtful board discussion in the February meeting, I invited Leslie and Carol to drill down a little deeper into the cost and circulation numbers for us. They will be at the meeting to review what they found and to answer questions. My preview/summary is that while the patron demand for digital content (primarily in the form of audiobooks and ebooks) continues to rise, the cost to CALS (and other libraries) to meet this demand goes up but not just because we are securing a larger quantity of books. It also rises because the publishers are hiking the prices of each title we circulate. This means we and other public libraries are getting fewer licenses from digital publishers for a given amount of money than we were getting a year ago for that same expenditure.

### **Congressional Field Hearing**

A half dozen members of Congress and a sizeable number of local citizens were present in Darragh for this event on March 14. Congressman Hill and others shared their positive reactions to the new Darragh Center space with me.

## **Fun Fact**

As you know, we've started holding monthly tours of the Main Library that are open to the public. These continue to be a great way for patrons to learn more about library resources available to them and get to know the various corners and amenities of the Main Library. Without a doubt, the highlight of the tour is the stop "behind the scenes" in the Collection Development department, where Leslie Blanchard shares a bit about how materials are selected for the library. The tour guests always have a bunch of great questions for Leslie, which she gamely answers. On the April 1 tour, someone asked about the oldest circulating book we own. Leslie had to look it up (librarians are good at that): Turns out the oldest book in CALS's circulating collection is an adult biography, Henry of Navarre by P. F. Willert. It was published in 1893 by G.P. Putnam's Sons. Now we know!

Leslie also shared that in a typical month, we receive approximately 400 requests from patrons through CALS's ["suggest a title" form](#) on our website. More than 90% of the titles are purchased. Patrons are encouraged to enter their name and library card number when they make the request, so they will be first in line to receive the book after it arrives and is catalogued.

Join an upcoming tour (10:30am on the first Wednesday of the month) and bring your question to see if you can stump our staff.

## **Next Meeting**

Our next board meeting will be on April 30, 2026.