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## Chief librarian's career one for the books

**TERRY COOKE**

The Hamilton Spectator

(Oct 10, 2009)

Ken Roberts, Hamilton's chief librarian, is a bit of an enigma. Living in a bureaucratic world where bland tends to work, Roberts has thrived without forsaking fun or intellectual curiosity.

The soft-spoken 63-year-old continues to run hard even as he approaches the finish line of an accomplished and eclectic 30-year career in public service. When Roberts retires to the West Coast in about 18 months, he will leave behind in Hamilton an outstanding local library service as a legacy of his leadership.

Roberts was born and raised in Los Angeles, and like Forrest Gump was a "runnin' fool" from a young age. He ran the mile in 4:16 in high school to win the Los Angeles City Championship, followed by an outstanding intercollegiate track and field career at UCLA.

Roberts arrived in Hamilton in 1968 to pursue a master's degree in ancient history at McMaster. Quickly realizing that the study of antiquity was unlikely to result in a wide range of career choices, Roberts followed his lifelong love of books into the profession of library sciences.

While moving across Canada to pursue library jobs of increasing responsibility, Roberts continued to indulge a passion for creative writing and became a prolific and award-winning author of children's books.

As a parent of three young kids, I can attest that his books, including *The Thumb In The Box* and *Hiccup Champion Of The World* are hits with the only audience that really matters.

Roberts also won a CanPro award for television writing and co-wrote a well-reviewed adult comedic play that has been produced on three continents.

Roberts found time along the way to teach children's literature at UBC, Simon Fraser University and University of Lethbridge as well as serving as storyteller in residence for the Vancouver School Board and games master for the World Improvisation Championships.

Roberts returned to Hamilton in 1994 as chief librarian just in time to lead the process of consolidating Hamilton's former city and suburban library systems. It is fair to say that the system Roberts inherited, particularly its rural components, was tired and badly in need of renewal.

A master collaborator, Roberts has leveraged partnerships with many community agencies while securing new capital investments to transform the local library system into today's technologically advanced and customer-friendly operation.

The new facilities have vastly extended the Hamilton library's reach with both inner-city immigrant communities and rural citizens, driving dramatic increases in library use in recent years. For instance, both Barton Street and Ancaster have each experienced increased usage in the past year of more than 40 per cent.

If you have not been to a library in Hamilton in some time you really owe it to yourself to check out the experience. With Sunday branch openings, broadband Internet access, DVDs, audio books, self checkout and lively children's play areas, this is most definitely not your parent's library of musty bookshelves and hushing librarians.

As Roberts prepares for a retirement filled with gardening and golf, perhaps his most satisfying moment will come with the re-opening in mid-2010 of a rebuilt downtown Central Library.

Thankfully, Roberts and the board of the Hamilton Public Library believe strongly that we should construct our public buildings to be not only functional but also beautiful.

Architect David Premi's dramatic design promises to be the most exciting new development in downtown in at least a generation, and will surely be a catalyst for further revitalization. It will be a fitting testament to the vision and energy of Hamilton's departing chief librarian.

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