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Shenandoah library celebrates reopening

By Lidia Dinkova
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Courtesy of Miami-Dade Public Library System

Coral Gables Senior High School students Linda and Leidy Villa ask county Commissioner Bruno Barreiro what he intends to do to preserve the historical buildings and the green spaces throughout Shenandoah during the grand re-opening of the Shenandoah branch public library.

Last time Katya Sarria came to the Shenandoah public library she remembers a dusty, dark-colored building.

"It was actually really depressing," said Katya, now a ninth-grader at Coral Gables Senior High School. "They even had books on the ground, like in caskets."

Wednesday evening Katya came to the grand re-opening of the renovated library. It was her first time back since the building was closed for reconstruction in 2007.

The library, 2111 SW 19 St, is completely renovated as all the interior walls were knocked down leaving a spacious 6,200-square-foot area complete with new furniture, low-rise and moveable bookshelves, a tile floor, 16 computers, 20 laptops, sections for children, young adults, and adults, a newly added staff area and a touch of "a little sparkle" like tiny glass tiles covering all the columns inside, said Victoria Galan, public affairs officer for Miami-Dade Public Library System.

The free Wi-Fi in the library extends to an outside courtyard graced by benches, three newly planted trees, and a stone wall proudly bearing a "Miami Dade Public Library System" sign. The wall replaced an older one from which electrical wires peeked out.

"In my mind this is a new facility," said Raymond Santiago, director of the Miami-Dade Public Library System. "It's an old building but the look is all new."

In 2001, Santiago approached the County Commission with plan to renovate and develop Miami-Dade County Public Libraries in order to better meet the needs of communities.

The Shenandoah branch renovation took three years and cost $1.5 million. It was put in the hands of architects, designers and engineers from Miami-Dade County's General Service Administration with Pedraza Architects acting as consultants. Associated Builders and Contractors were hired to do the reconstruction.

"The library was pretty much gutted," said Jorge Pedraza, president of Pedraza Architects.

The library was built in 1957 and architects aimed to keep a 1950s look, while improving the facility and making it more spacious.

"We tried to keep that design style as much as possible but in the same time modernize it and make it comfortable for residents," Pedraza said.

Renovations were complete in October 2010 but the re-opening ceremony was not held until Wednesday evening.

At the event, Miami Mayor Tomas Regalado, City Commissioner Frank Carollo, and County Commissioner Bruno Barreiro spoke, encouraging residents to use the library and emphasizing the importance of "community centers" like a library.

Regalado recalled how crammed it was in the library years ago when he came to read to children.

"When I came in this afternoon, I thought 'Wow, this is really something,'?" he said.

Also at the ceremony, a photo exhibit called "Know Your Neighborhood: Explore Shenandoah," by Shenandoah Middle School students was unveiled. The school is a museums magnet and the photos were taken as part of an eighth-grade history class. The students took a tour of Shenandoah, and studied and photographed the more than 90-year-old buildings in the neighborhood.

Katya, whose photo was part of the exhibition, chatted with her friends as the ceremony winded down. She, Leidy and Linda Villa, and Leah Botton, all ninth-graders at Gables High, recalled the dilapidated building the library used to be and the times when they sat crammed next to each other, watching puppet shows. They plan to come to the library at least once a week to study for their Advanced Placement exams.

"Now, it is like I want to come here all the time," Botton said.