

# Richmond Public Library's International Living Room at the O Zone

By Shelley J. Civkin.

Now that the 2010 Olympic Winter Games are over and the Richmond O Zone is being dismantled, we can reflect back on what it means to host the world. But first, let me shatter all your illusions right up front. We started out being a library, thinking that international visitors would rush in to use the Internet and check out news from home all the livelong day. Next thing you know, we've turned into a TV lounge, tattoo parlour, popcorn-serving cinema, face-painting salon, and Ralphy the Rhino photo op.

Just so we're clear, I'm definitely NOT pooh-poohing our Olympic experience. Far from it. Richmond Public Library staff, on the whole, had a blast being part of the O Zone celebrations. But were we strutting our "library" stuff to the world? Not really. We started out one thing and turned into another real fast...because that's what our visitors wanted. And like fishermen say: You gotta bait the hook to suit the fish.

## Anticipating the audience

Before the Olympics, we thought of it as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to show the world that we're way more than just your average public library. In a sweet turn of irony, we showed them that under exceptional circumstances, a library has got to be more than just books, movies and technology. It's got to be a flexible, fluid entity that responds to (or better yet, anticipates) its audience. It starts out with noble intentions, and then it gives the crowds what they REALLY want – a warm, dry place to watch Olympic sporting events, get a Canadian flag tattoo and pose with Ralphy.

It was a bonus when visitors happened to stumble upon the Crossroads area of our International Living Room, where we proudly displayed our Canadian Showcase of books, magazines and BookCrossing selections. And if they actually looked at the books and magazines, even better. But more often than not our awesome "Feed me Books" book bags caught their eye, and the cultural experience was over. But were they happy? And did they love the look of our transformed, Canadian-flag-decorated library. You betcha!

We got comments like: "This is the coolest library I've ever seen" and "This is what every library should be. It's beautiful. It's comfortable. And it's friendly!" and "My little girl said this is a good day. She didn't expect to come to the library and get a Muk Muk [painted] on her face...And you can watch TV here!" You can't help but know that people liked what they saw.



Crowds watching the large screen TV cheer for another Canadian gold-medal win! Photo by Brian Phillips.

My impression is that a lot of international visitors were surprised by the cool interactive **Coach** Exhibit we had for kids, and the life-size Ralphy the Rhino standees where they could have their picture taken. And the huge **Story of the Games** displays that documented each day's medal triumphs on the front pages of the Vancouver Sun and Province. What they'd expected was books and maybe Internet stations, but what they got was way more.

## Experience full of surprises

All I can deduce is that the muses must have been shining their beatific smiles on us, because not only did we get an unpremeditated drawing demonstration by Trevor Lai (creator of the Ralphy the Rhino book series and round library card) which 200 people attended, but we also discovered

talented RPL staff that could face-paint the Olympic mascots on our littlest visitors, free-hand! Sweet!



Ralphie creator, Trevor Lai, poses with little speed skater Zoe.  
Photo by Teresa Lai.

Hey, are we surprised that people used RPL like a home-away-from-home TV den where they could put

their feet up and watch the Games? Heck no! After all, we didn't call it the International Living Room for nothing. So, like I always say: You can lead an international visitor to a library but you can't make 'em read a book!

What I can tell you is that the 17-day Olympic Games and the Richmond O Zone experience held nothing but surprises for RPL staff, who rose to the occasion with their trademark flexibility and good natured attitude. While we didn't get what we expected, we got much, much more. And it will surely go down in our collective history as a once-in-a-lifetime experience that we will always remember.

Sometimes a library is just a library. Other times, it's...well...the coolest place on earth!

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