

Nelson Wolff -- 2014 GT Top 25 Winner

Elaine Pittman | February 25, 2014



The first thing you should know is that Nelson Wolff is a bibliophile. With more than 1,500 first editions in his book collection, the county judge of Bexar County, Texas, may seem an unlikely proponent of moving away from the traditional library system. But after reading a biography about Steve Jobs, Wolff was inspired to bring library services to outlying areas and into the 21st century.

His mission was dual-focused: “To go into an area of the county that was economically disadvantaged and didn’t have access to technology and put in a first-class system. And to break down the barriers to reading and make it easier for people to check out e-books.”

With those goals in mind, Wolff moved forward at what may be considered light-speed for public-sector technology projects. After reading the biography in August 2012, Wolff assembled a team to make the vision a reality, went public with the idea in January 2013 and that September, Bexar County launched BiblioTech, which is touted as America’s first bookless public library.

At 4,000 square feet, it’s one-third the size of a traditional library branch — and it also cost one-third the price, said Wolff. While patrons aren’t greeted by the traditional rows

and stacks of books, they can access thousands of titles wirelessly and remotely via their own devices and 600 e-readers available for checkout. The space is built around 48 iMacs and lined with tablets; in the children's room, Surface tables and an Xbox Kinect encourage interactive learning.

Built in-house, the county's IT team learned about cutting-edge technologies like augmented reality and how to implement them in the library.

Wolff called BiblioTech a "great success," adding that on average, 300 people use the facility daily. And he hopes that success will expand as kiosks are installed around Bexar County so patrons can check out e-books when and where it's convenient, and through satellite sites like one that recently opened in the courthouse's jury room.

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