

Director's Report for August 28, 2025

Sprinting to The Finish Line: Our maintenance, collection development, communications, and public service departments have been working as hard as the contractor's people to ensure that we reopen the Main Library on September 20. By the end of this week, almost all of the CALS employees who have had temporary offices in the building inside the LR Port will be out of them. The Mini-Main Library that has served as the downtown library will close at the end of this month. We will begin taking down the features that helped us maintain scaled down services the last two years and moving those back inside the remodeled space. The contractor anticipates having Temporary Certificates of Occupancy for floors 2,3,& 4 by September 4, and the Lower Level, 1st and 5th floors by September 12. Unfortunately, the glass for the new lobby entrance will not arrive until early November. The vendor, Old Castle Glass, neglected to place the order when CDI turned it in. CDI and Tameka will meet the moment and fashion something that will be attractive and functional for the opening.

Main Reopening September 20: Tameka and her department are finalizing the exciting plans for the multiple events in connection with the reopening. The development staff and Eliza are working on portions of that. Ellen and the programmers have a big hand in all of this as well. Details of all of these plans are below. The manager of the Main Library, Joe Hudak, is leading the Hospitality Task Force to ensure that the new library's first impression is a positive one. They are fine-tuning a range of plans from parking offsite with shuttle vans to Main to cleaning the elevators and stairwells of our parking deck. Joe and Stu Nichols, the head of safety solicit your input for ways to make the reopening a thorough success, worthy of the project and our patrons. We'll update this page as plans develop: <https://cals.org/main2025>.

Updates on Public Art at Main: In 1967, Little Rock businessman Raymond Rebsamen, a veteran of both World Wars (Here is the EOA [link](#) about Rebsamen), donated *Icarus and Daedalus*. Prior to the remodeling it sat in the courtyard outside of the former Darragh Center. Upon reopening, it will take up a new spot east of the main entrance. *Arkansas' Heroes*, sculpturer Vinnie Bagwell's bronze work depicting an Arkansan who fought with the USCT in the Civil War, is proceeding on schedule for a fall installation. Earlier this week she sent this report to Karama and me: "Good news: All of the bronze pieces came out of the shells without fail. Next step: Reassembly and chasing. Stay tuned." Here are a couple of photos Vinnie sent us along with her report.

LR Visitor Center on the CALS Campus: The CVB lawyers have been working on a lease which we expect to have back for review soon. Once our lawyers have finished with that, we will circulate it to the board. Gina Gemberling reported to me this week that they expect to have design drawings from their architects Wittsell Evans Rasco to share with us by the middle of September for our approval.



CALS Park vs. The Deck Park: Last week the LR City Board of Directors voted to spend \$500,000 of city funds, along with \$2M of federal money, to have engineers draw plans for a deck park over I-30 between 6th and 9th Streets even though no one has identified any possible source for the \$100,000,000 to \$300,000,000 this deck park would cost. Here is the ADG [story](#) reporting this decision. As the newspaper reports in some detail, the city ignored the Masterplan it had adopted just last year. That plan, which cost the \$745K, recommended seeking less expensive, more popular alternatives to the deck park. This decision by our elected officials defies common sense and fiscal accountability. City Directors Joan Adcock and Kathy Webb opposed this waste of federal and city tax dollars. I have personally thanked both of them.

My objection to this waste goes beyond that of a frustrated taxpayer. I have been pleading with the city for over two years to help CALS by making simple improvements to the space across from the newly remodeled library. These improvements would entail planting mature trees for shade, installing benches, a few paths, pollinator gardens, and building a small programming stage on this space. This could all be achieved within the next 12 months with the City's support and at a tiny fraction of the what they spent last week on a plan for a deck park that will never be built. A neighboring private property owner has generated a budget estimate of \$100,000 that it would take to fund my proposal. Rogers Yarnell and his wife live in the 300 Third Building (site of Copper Grill) on the south side of what he and I are now calling CALS Park. He and I are working with a group of local master gardeners and a retired botanist from UA Little Rock to prepare a simple, feasible, affordable option to present next month to the public after the grand reopening.

Strategic Planning: Branch and department teams will meet during the Staff Retreat on October 13 to develop their first strategies to support the strategic plan. Managers have already received their instructions and worksheets to support that strategy session. The strategies that come out of those breakout sessions will be assessed and prioritized by the leadership team, with input from our planning consultant at Envisio.

Video Production: I shared late last month the 2 min [video](#) Stone Ward produced for us. Most of the feedback has been very positive, both among staff and other librarians. Here's one comment I got from a library director in Clayton County, GA: *"I've shared the video with my leadership team and everyone was just blown away. . . . fantastic job by your staff and the production crew. The final video is great!"* Thanks to Tameka, our collection development librarians (Leslie, Alison, Michael, and Amy who are the stars of the video), and Stone Ward for this work.

Program Updates: We hosted several back-to-school events this month including three large-scale events at Nixon, Children's, and Terry. Families were able to celebrate the end of summer with fun activities and performances, take advantage of free haircuts and health screenings, and receive school supplies. We also participated in many back-to-school events hosted by other organizations. It is a robust time for community partnerships as so many folks are looking for ways to support students and families. It's gratifying that the library is sought out as a frequent partner and recognized as an institution that supports education. Our Tech Card program is rolling out for another year. We will distribute around 50,000 cards to schools to give students and teachers access to our online resources.

Of course, the reopening of Main will be a programming focus with many opportunities to showcase our remodeled space and to celebrate moving back into the building. A few highlights for the September 20th reopening include a performance from an ASO ensemble performing *Carnival of the Animals*, a visit from the author and illustrator of the popular children's books *Fancy Nancy*, and an opportunity for local authors to present and promote their books. The following week, we are working on a special event to invite senior adults to celebrate the reopening with us. On Tuesday, September 23, we will host a Senior Prom event for patrons sixty and over featuring a DJ, a salsa dancing lesson, a drumming circle, and information about

community resources. This event also connects with one of the goals of our new strategic plan and is part of a renewed focus to connect older adults with library programs and events.

As mentioned last month, we are drawing closer to this year's Six Bridges Book Festival which will kick off just a few days after the September board meeting. All authors have been announced on the Six Bridges webpage (<https://cals.org/six-bridges-book-festival/>). We're excited to host forty-eight authors including returning favorites like Eli Cranor, Regina Black, and Susie Dumond, noted journalists such as Wright Thompson, Juanita Tolliver, and Gardiner Harris, and popular fiction writers including Louis Sachar, Dolen Perkins-Valdez, and Annabel Monaghan. There's truly something for everyone at this year's Fest.

Summer Success: This summer, as in summers past, CALS partnered with AR Kids Read to host their free, 3 week, Science of Reading based literacy program. Four other libraries around the state also participated. In our system, Dee Brown, Rooker, McMath, and the Children's library served as host sites in 2025. AR Kids Read was able to tutor 257 students with 80% of students maintaining or exceeding their reading benchmark. Three fourths of that 80% advanced to the next benchmark during the summer. This partnership with AR Kids Read is obviously working. We look forward to continuing it next summer.

Capital Campaign: Our total in campaign pledges and gifts is now \$1,601,835, or 80% of the way to our \$2M goal. More than 200 donors have contributed to the campaign to help us achieve this success, with gifts ranging from \$1 to multiple six-figure gifts. We are looking forward to thanking our donors at a Main Library preview reception on Thursday, September 18, from 5-7pm. Eliza will circulate invitations at the board meeting. I hope you will save the date and make plans to attend. Every donor to the campaign has an inspiring "library story" (and we appreciate all of them), but I want to share with you all about one donor in particular:

Some of you may have known Judith K. Faust, former director of the state's Division of Children and Family Services, who spent the last two decades of her career teaching graduate students in social work at UA Little Rock. In addition to being a social worker and a teacher and mentor, Judith was a passionate community volunteer. She served on the CALS board in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. I had the privilege of serving on the CALS board when she was the President of the board. Judith died on November 10, 2024, after a long battle with cancer. Last month, we learned that in her estate plan, Judith left approximately \$400,000 to the CALS Foundation. Approximately 78% of this generous gift will support the Next Chapter campaign, with the remaining portion creating a new permanent fund in the CALS Foundation's endowment for the ongoing support of Community Resources programming. Eliza and I have recently gotten to spend some time with the people implementing Judith's estate plan, and we have been humbled and inspired as we have learned more about her generous spirit and her dedication to her library. We are pleased that her estate's trustee chose a naming opportunity honoring Judith within the Main Library. I hope you will join us in celebrating Judith's significant and meaningful legacy gift, which will impact CALS patrons for years to come.

Development: The Arkansas Arts Council has approved CALS for an \$8,800 grant in support of our Writers in the Schools program and the Six Bridges Book Festival. Heart of Arkansas United

Way has renewed their \$5,000 grant in support of Count Up (with the possibility of another \$5,000 renewal in spring 2026). On July 28, Ron Robinson Theater hosted the third annual production of “The 24 Hour Plays: Little Rock,” for which 24 actors, six writers, and six directors collaborated to create six brand new plays (you guessed it: they did all of this in 24 hours). Ticket proceeds supported our Be Mighty program, and they raised more than \$10,000!

Fewer than 100 tickets remain for our Six Bridges Book Festival fundraising event to be held on October 5. The event will be headlined by popular novelist Shelby Van Pelt and moderated by Ashlei King, who anchors Good Day Arkansas on FOX16 News. Tickets are on sale [here](#).

This week, we received our 2025 determination letter from the Windgate Foundation: the CALS Foundation will receive a \$250,000 programming renewal to help fund 2026 library programming. As many of you know, this is the fifth consecutive programming grant the CALS Foundation has received from the Windgate Foundation. This year’s grant includes line items to fund visual art programs system-wide, community outreach, Count Up, the Six Bridges Book Festival, and the Butler Center. In addition, the CALS Foundation has been approved for a \$250,000 challenge grant; if we can raise an additional \$250,000 for the Next Chapter Capital Campaign between September 1, 2025, and December 31, 2026, the Windgate Foundation will grant us \$250,000 as a dollar-for-dollar match. We are very grateful to the Windgate Foundation for their continued trust and investment in CALS. I’m grateful to Eliza’s leadership which enabled this fruitful relationship with Windgate. Following last month’s resolution, Eliza submitted our application to the AEDC’s Arkansas Community Assistance Grant Program seeking funding for accessibility improvements at Roberts Library. Notices of awards are scheduled to be sent in “Fall 2025.”

Communications: As mentioned above, much of Communications’ focus has been—and will continue to be—on Main Library’s grand reopening. Tameka and her excellent team are planning a carnival-style homecoming for the reimagined library. Since the schedule is still being finalized, details have only been available to staff so far. The day will begin with a parade around Library Square featuring participants such as Rodney Block, Ballet Arkansas, Ballet Quetzalli, and Parkview’s band. Additional highlights will include line dancing, a local author event, cooking demonstrations, food trucks, and outdoor games. We’re now finalizing the details and will begin adding events to the online calendar this week. You can view the draft schedule [here](#). **Remember the following dates: September 16, media/preview day; September 18, donor reception; and September 20, opening day.**

On the media side, we’re preparing stories leading up to the opening ([see Eliza’s *Inviting feature*](#)), and we have coverage scheduled in October to remind everyone that we’re open. We’ve begun promotion of the Six Bridges Book Festival with the help of Festival Coordinator Drew Herget. The website has been updated with the author roster, and the full schedule will be available soon. Bookmarks are also available if you’d like some for yourself or to share with others.

We’re also excited about the “Color Your Card” contest for a limited-edition library card in celebration of Main’s reopening. Communications has been collaborating with talented artist and

CALS youth programmer Adaja Cooper on this project. The contest received 48 submissions in three categories – children, teens, and adults – and 1,310 votes. Here are the winners:

[Children - Ameena Mahira Syed](#) [Teen - Autumn Barnes](#) [Adult - Matthew Castellano](#)

September is Library Card Sign-Up Month: We are again partnering with the North Little Rock Public Library System, and this year we’ve expanded to include Faulkner, Garland, Saline, and the Pine Bluff–Jefferson County Library. Two key events are planned: Bring a Buddy Day on September 6 at all participating libraries, and Power Up and Play at Main Event on September 27. Both events are designed to encourage new card registrations while showing appreciation to current cardholders. Because we’re collaborating with more libraries this year, we’re offering library card discounts as the “Power of the Card” instead of “Bookworm Bargains.” The full list of participating businesses is available at <https://cals.org/lcsum>.

Circulation and Traffic: Although we still have not gotten back to pre-pandemic levels of visitors at all libraries, it is encouraging that we are seeing more people come through our doors each month. July’s door count was 118,072, the highest since October 2024, when the door count was 141,371. That number was an outlier, likely driven by early voting in several of our locations. Physical circulation is still trending down, but we’re hopeful that the reopening of Main Library with its much larger collection will slow or even reverse that trend. We anticipate that door count will also rise considerably, at least for the first couple of months after reopening, as local residents drop in to see the renovated library. We also expect to see a rise in the number of meeting room bookings, which will also drive higher door counts.

Butler Center Books Is Coming Back: CALS had a small book publishing arm for several years. Five or six years ago the Butler Center determined that expense of this enterprise was not sustainable. We haven’t published a new title since 2020, when we published *Outspoken: The Olly Neal Story*. Now we have a chance to resume this contribution to the state’s literature with a more efficient model proposed by the University of Arkansas Press. Roberts Library staff have been working with the editor-in-chief at the UA Press on this. The UA Press already acts as our distributor for our backlist of almost 70 titles which you can see [here](#). They process our book orders and maintain records on sales and inventory. They are offering to take over all the production tasks (contracting with authors, producing the physical and e-books, paying royalties, fulfilling orders, and setting up systems for Print on Demand) but publish books under our imprint and with our editorial input. They are eager to have our input on future titles so we will establish an editorial board of volunteers and Roberts Library staff to consider future titles focused on telling the story of Arkansas and its history. There will be some transition tasks in redoing agreements with authors to reflect UA Press’s involvement, but they will walk us through these. The staff at the UA Press is eager to make this work and has experience in working with outside editorial boards. This collaboration will enable CALS to again publish one or two new titles each year under the Butler Center Books imprint.

Next Board Meeting: The next meeting will be on September 25th, in the new 5th floor boardroom of the Main Library.