

**Loud @ Pathways Library : a youth engagement initiative**  
Written by Margot Keane & Cherie Goldsmith

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## **Abstract**

Loud @ Pathways Library is a youth initiative in the Pine Rivers Shire, catering for 12-17 year olds, aiming to provide a regular meeting place, a space to interact and meet new friends whilst in a fun, safe environment and, of course, to promote libraries as “Cool” places to be. Once a month the Library is open exclusively for the youth of Pine Rivers Shire, where they have access to free Internet, Foxtel Music, pizza, soft drinks, games as well as the regular library services. The initiative is proving popular with demand often exceeding capacity.

Most of the activities traditionally held in Libraries are directed towards young children and adults and often youth, the group that most need encouragement to come into the Library, are neglected. The Loud @ Pathways Library initiative was constructed to combat this problem by making the Library experience a fun and comfortable one. The youth get to know the Library staff and realise that they are friendly people who can be approached with a question or to fill an information need.

Local community members of the Friends of Pine Rivers Library – Pathways, and the local Police Beat, assist staff in the provision of this program, providing valuable interaction between members of the community and the youth.

This initiative has assisted in developing youth leadership in the area with the formation of “The Angels”, a group of youth volunteers who assist in setting up for the Loud nights, and subtly monitor the behavior within their peer group. The Library aims to further develop this volunteer group to assist with events at the Pathways Library and to create a Youth Forum, where ideas for services and further activities can be discussed and developed.

The Pathways Library has used the Loud nights to assist in purchasing relevant music, movies and books for the young adult collection. With suggest to purchase forms available on the nights, book displays from Library suppliers where the youth are asked to select titles to be added to the collection.

## **Loud @ Pathways Library : a youth engagement initiative**

### **Youth get Loud@Pathways Library**

Loud @ Pathways Library is a youth engagement initiative operating in the Pine Rivers Shire. It is a partnership between Pathways and the Mango Hill Police Beat. 12-17 year olds have a place to hang out and feel comfortable. It provides an opportunity for them to socialise with their peers and interact with members of our volunteer community in a safe and welcoming environment.

In May of 2006, Pathways Library launched it's first ever youth night, Loud @ Pathways Library. That night there were close to 100 teenagers in the Library, listening to music, playing internet games, eating pizza, drinking soft drink and just hanging out. By the end of the night those that had hosted the night - three Pathways library staff, the local Police officer and members of the Pine Rivers Friends of Libraries - Pathways (FOLs) were exhausted, yet satisfied. Our goals were met; the participants had fun, and were enthusiastic about coming to the next Loud.

This program continues to be a great success a year and a half on. Over 1,300 teenagers have attended consuming 2,080 drinks, 3,700 slices of pizza, and 650 hours of internet time. More importantly, we have seen these teens having fun, interacting with each other and interacting with staff and volunteers. For these teens libraries have become welcoming and fun places to hang out, librarians have become cooler and approachable and the generation gap between teens and our volunteers has been narrowed.

This paper and accompanying presentation at the Australian Libraries and Information Association's (ALIA) Library Technicians Conference will explain why we do what we do and how everyone can have a go.

We aim to inspire other public library staff and remove some of the apprehension sometimes faced by those aiming to deliver youth services.

It will look at the growth of the Pine Rivers Shire and more specifically the northern growth corridor which incorporates North Lakes. We will describe the original concept development and initial planning. Running a Loud @ Pathways Library event will be discussed including staffing and the support of volunteers, both adult and teen. Complementing services for youth will also be described, along with the vision for the growth and expansion of library focused youth services in the Pine Rivers Shire.

### **Painting the picture**

Pathways Library is part of the Pathways Precinct which also contains a training center, meeting rooms, pool & leisure center, coffee shop, business incubator, adjunct child care center, IT rooms for the Urban Learning Center (an Education Queensland Year 11 and 12 secondary college), and community centre. The library has a co-share arrangement with Education Queensland and provides resource support for the year 11 and 12 students.

Pathways Library has a strong IT focus. It was the first public library in Australia using RFID technology for both checkouts and returns when it opened in September 2004. The Pathways Center and the Library strive to provide the community with access to quality services and spaces for recreation and learning.

Many of the Shire facilities are named according to the suburb in which they are located. Pathways services a number of surrounding suburbs and therefore does not have a suburb “attached to its name”. Pathways’ home base is North Lakes, a master planned urban development on the eastern edge of the Pine Rivers Shire, north of Brisbane. This area is undergoing rapid development and population growth. North Lakes itself currently has a population of 13,000 and it is estimated that once development is completed the population will reach approximately 25,000 people. The growth rate in the northern suburbs is around 4%. It is predicted that by 2016 (less than 10 years away) the population of the suburbs surrounding Pathways will reach almost 65,000.

Creating an environment where people can come together “to meet, to learn, to play” is essentially what Pathways Library strives to achieve. Not only for groups traditionally targeted by public libraries, such as children and older readers, but also the youth. When you think of the stereotypical library you think of a quiet place, where no food or drink is allowed, people are asked to “be quiet” and learning is a serious business.

Pathways Library is far from this picture, background music is continuously played; food and beverages are encouraged with a Café in the building providing coffee, snacks and meals. The library is open 7 days a week and provides 24/7 lending via a dispenser and returning via an automatic book drop. People are encouraged to think of the library as “their” place, a meeting place for members of the community young and old. The staff “uniform” is a purple polo shirt and volunteers of all ages receive a polo shirt to wear when they are assisting with library activities.

The Pathways ethos of “To meet, to learn, to play” is reflected in the library providing opportunities for community members to meet via children’s services including story time and baby rhyme time, and with groups including a craft group, current affairs discussion group, family history group and many reading groups.

The library enables learning opportunities through the provision of Internet training for members of the community and a wide variety of materials in the library collection aimed to educate and entertain. Seating arrangements in the library encourage communication and ideas sharing with a more subtle approach to learning. Even the computers in the children’s area have chairs grouped so one can “play” and the other can “learn”. Removing the need for quietness means that people of all ages can share ideas, discuss issues and feel comfortable to ask staff for assistance to guide their learning opportunities.

Play is also a big part of the Pathways Library with a big screen television and accompanying Sound Tubes providing directional audio to nearby seating, allowing viewers to listen without disturbing others. The Foxtel programs are varied and include the history channel and the news channel as well as the “must have” music video channel. Background music and the “food and drink are Ok” philosophy are designed to encourage the community to stay in the library and enjoy themselves.

The library has a high computer to visitor ratio so it is not necessary to book a computer. This service is vital for the “new arrivals”, who are still “moving in” and trying to establish a base. Many of our community members are from overseas or interstate so they come to the library to make contact with home, and to find out what services and facilities are available in their new community.

The library staff play a pivotal role in its success. All staff at Pathways Library have comprehensive experience in libraries with most having library related qualifications. It is a small but vibrant team. The library operates 7 days per week with 5 FTEs (full time equivalents). They are encouraged to be technology savvy and to create relationships with customers. Through the ethos of “ To meet, to learn, to play” we aim to encourage the use of the Library as their third place, an extension of their home for all members of the community, and as such staff are encouraged to treat library customers as guests or friends and endeavour to make each customer feel special.

### **Why Loud @ Pathways Library?**

The vast majority of residents moving into the area are families with children and teenagers. The community is still growing and as yet does not have the population base to support facilities such as police youth clubs or cinemas (cinemas are in the next stage of the shopping centre development). Pathways aims to grow with and be responsive to the needs of its community.

The “Young Adult” area is relatively small however it contains lounges, a wide range of youth magazines, a young adult collection including fiction, graphic novels and relevant lifestyle non-fiction. This space is conveniently close to a bank of computers and the CD and DVD collections. We are currently expanding the library and providing additional space for teenagers as the Urban Learning Centre has rapidly increasing student numbers, as well as increasing numbers of teenagers in the community.

Pathways Library staff regularly interact with youth in the library, boys who play Pc & online games regularly, the students from the North Lakes Urban Learning Centre and others youth in the community who we may meet while shopping. As with any other customer requiring help staff assist them in finding resources by subtly teaching and explaining as they search the library catalogue and other on-line resources, encouraging them to explore and learn.

Teens have often been seen as the “problem group” as many self-respecting, “kool” teens wouldn’t be caught dead in a library. Too many libraries are deemed intimidating or boring and teenagers do not see them as welcoming places.

The Loud @ Pathways Library was developed to make the library environment a comfortable one to be in, to make it a place to socialise and have fun as well as a place to find information. The youth get to know the library staff and realise that they are friendly, patient people who can be approached with a question or to fill an information need. They see what we have, not just books but DVDs, CDs, graphic novels and magazines. They don’t have a librarian, glasses on the end of her nose, ssshhhhhing them. They can eat and drink in the library while seated on comfortable lounges, talking with each other in a relaxed environment.

Loud developed after listening to the wants of the youth in the area, especially those in the 12-15 year age bracket, where parents often prefer to have children supervised. Through listening to the youth wanting internet time and time in the library without parents or other members of the public, the Pathways team with the support of the Manager, Pathways devised Loud.

Two hours of youth only time in the Library on a monthly basis, ½ computer access, pizza and soft drinks and music videos, of course played LOUD. With 1 ½ hours of “not computer” time the youth would need to interact with each other, staff and volunteers.

### **Who is Involved?**

Loud @ Pathways Library is a partnership between Pathways Management, Pine Rivers Shire Council, Friends of Pine Rivers Libraries – Pathways and the Mango Hill Police Beat. Due to the support of Pathways Management and the Pine Rivers Shire Council the Loud nights are completely funded, enabling us to keep the program free.

Two library staff attend Loud, providing staff the opportunity to interact with teens in the area, fostering ongoing communication and enables our youth to get to know the library staff. It is not unusual for the teens to approach us to have a conversation, show us something cool on YouTube or share a joke. Staff IT skills have also been increased by watching and learning from our youth. Youth are more than happy to share the answer to “how did you do that?”

The local police officer who resides in the Mango Hill Police Beat attends Loud. The police presence reassures parents and ensures that we do not have “unexpected visitors” just dropping in to Loud events. For the officer it is an opportunity to interact with the youth of the community in a non-confrontational way.

We are fortunate enough to have many active Friends of Libraries volunteers (FOLs) at Pathways Library. FOLs assist in serving drinks & pizza and providing extra supervision. As the FOLs are older members of the community the interaction during Loud is an important one. The FOLs see the youth as young people with thoughts and ideas and the youth importantly learn to interact with people, especially older people, from the community. Our FOLs members have been pleasantly surprised at the youth behaviour, yes teenagers do say please and thank you.

This initiative has assisted in developing youth leadership with the formation of “The Angels”, a group of youth volunteers who help with Loud nights. The name "Angels" began unofficially as "they were no angels", but the youth responded positively to the name and so, the name stuck. They are predominantly boys between the ages of 12-16, and we have had many new comers over the last year, each excited to get their own volunteer purple Pathways shirt. These “Angels” assist in setting up for the Loud nights, and subtly monitor the behavior within their peer group. The group provides informal mentorship to younger members and explains how the night works to newcomers.

### **Feedback**

Here is what some of the regulars thought about Loud @ Pathways Library.

“It’s awesome because there’s something to do at night.” – Luke, 15  
“One mad night to hang out with your mates.” – Nathan, 15  
“It’s kool because it’s something to do on Friday nights.” – Jake, 14  
“I like to meet with my friends without Mum and Dad around” – Sarah, 13  
“A very good fun environment ☺” – Jason, 14  
“It’s good because there’s free pizza.” – Mitchell, 12  
“It’s cool because there's free pizza, drink and net.” – Joe, 13

### **How Loud @ Pathways Library Runs**

Loud @ Pathways Library is run once a month, on the third Friday of each month. Although the majority participants in Loud come from the North Lakes, Mango Hill area we also attract youth from surrounding areas and shires.

“How do we manage 100 very excited teens for 2 hours?” The answer is – “It’s surprisingly easy”. The youth are required to book before the night and numbers are limited to 100 (due to numbers of PC’s). They can book by phone, email or in person. We take name, address, phone number and age information as well as whether they are library members.

The local pizza store donates several pizza vouchers each night and Library members are eligible for the random pizza draw. No-one says that they must be a member to attend but the answer to “how do I win a free pizza?” is “Get a library card”.

Tickets go quickly, and it has often been the case that we have to turn teens away as we reach capacity. We encourage participants to collect their tickets before the night to enable quick entry. The ticket designates when they receive their ½ internet and is a voucher to redeem their drinks and pizza. Teenagers usually choose the same coloured ticket as their mates.

On the Friday night of Loud we close the library as normal, at 5pm. Around this time the ‘Angels’ arrive. They move and re-arrange furniture, set up tables, move youth displays to more prominent locations, set up board games, organise the soft drinks and make sure the music is loud! Many of the Angels have been with us for over a year and know the routine, completing these jobs very quickly and often without direction. The Friends of Libraries arrive close to 6pm to help supervise (and socialise) when it all begins.

Between 5pm and 6pm, Youth congregate in the foyer near the library entrance. Ticket holders are checked in first followed by those with bookings but no ticket. A good reason to visit the library sometime before Loud.

During the event Channel V (Foxtel music channel) is broadcast throughout the library via the speaker system and through the Sound Tubes. The Pizza usually arrives between 6.30-7pm to satisfy the hungry tummies. Nothing like food to calm an energetic teenager.

The most popular internet sites and games played during Loud include Runescape, Conquer, flash games, and of course YouTube. If you see a bunch of teenagers clumped together around a computer it’s likely they are looking at something funny on YouTube. Social networking sites, including MySpace and msn messenger are also popular.

While the local youth are within the Library we see it as an opportunity to gain their input into the collection. To assist us in purchasing music relevant to youth suggestion slips for music are handed out to participants, suggestions collated and passed on to collection development staff. Some of the selections would definitely not be what we would think to include in the music collection and we find that as they are savvy to what is popular, the music chosen is well used by both the youth and other Library users.

Book selection is also undertaken on a regular basis. A selection of new young adult novels (including graphic novels), are displayed and the youth are able to select items for inclusion in the collection. We see this as an important aspect of collection development. They feel empowered by shaping the collection and we know the collection is then relevant to young members of our community.

When working with the youth at loud and also at other times within the library it is important to relate and speak to them as you would anyone else. By being friendly and genuine we start to build relationships. Setting limits by recognising what is acceptable in behaviour and attitudes, especially when engaging with them on-mass is very important. When they get out of line they are reminded gently of what the expectations are, by starting at the low end of the scale we give ourselves somewhere to go if the behaviour continues, giving them an opportunity to modify their behaviour without “using a stick”. “Tips for working with Teenagers” (appendix 1) was developed by the Library Management Team and create a framework for staff to develop communication skills with teens.

### **Changes over time**

The majority of the “Angels” are also now regulars to the library, playing online games with other youth after school, meeting friends and even completing homework and assignments in the library.

The percentage of attendees with library membership has risen from 40% on our first Loud night to around 85%.

We have seen the mix of predominately 12-14 years old boys develop into a mix of boys and girls with ages from 12 to 17. Rather than being a night to just play on-line games, they interact, share computers, sit in corners or “nest” in the shelves to chat and catch up, play board games or listen to music on the listening stations.

Only a few of the youth actually borrow on Loud night. This was never an expected outcome from Loud. But Loud has generated repeat visits at other times to borrow items they have seen whilst attending Loud.

Loud is continuing to evolve, we are now finding that some of our participants don't necessarily want access to the Internet, especially some of the girls. They are more interested in coming to meet with their friends, away from Mum & Dad. Loud is seen as a safe place for the youth of the area to come, parents are happy their kids are in supervised area.

### **Direction/Future Development**

Loud has had a sustainable future so far due to support from youth, parents and volunteers in the community. As each group “outgrows” Loud another group turns 12. The future shape of Loud will be determined by the Angels as their leadership skills increase. There are opportunities to introduce additional games for those not interested in the Internet, such as Celebrity Heads, multi player games or karaoke, but the program will be driven by the youth volunteers in consultation with those attending Loud.

After school and during school holidays the computers at the library are under high demand due to teenagers wanting to socialise and play online games. Instead of spending time individually playing their games at home they choose to come to the library and meet their friends and socialise as well as play their games.

There is also the opportunity to create a web presence for Loud @ Pathways Library on social networking sites such as Myspace or Be-bo. The majority of our Angels are highly proficient in technology they will be the drivers of this space, utilising pictures, comments and creating links to popular sites accessed during Loud. The most challenging aspect of this project will be striking the balance between what the youth deem is acceptable content and what we as a local government library consider is acceptable.

### **Flow on effect**

The success of Loud has generated shire-wide demand for youth programs in the other 4 branch libraries. A new shire-wide program called GameOn made its debut in the September/October school holidays. Participants between 7-9, 10-12 and 13-18 are able to book for a 1 hour internet gaming session. They have the option of ‘free play’ using games approved by library staff or compete in mini tournaments developed by staff representatives from each branch. Most of these games require reading game rules and objectives, and a good deal of hand-eye coordination. Pathways Library ran 12 one hour sessions over the September/October school holidays and a Runescape Tournament, for teenagers 12-18 years.

The GameOn program will also be offered on a regular basis throughout the school year. Each branch has a variation of the program, catering to the needs of the teenagers and the library. Pathways Library continues to offer 2 one hour sessions weekly during the school year. The GameOn program is coordinated by a branch librarian and an online gaming working group with representatives from each branch.

Pathways Library is fortunate to have a large number of youth volunteers who are happy to help in developing the Runescape Tournament Quests. These quests have been used shire wide. These ‘Angels’ also help supervise on tournament day.

### **Conclusion**

Loud @ Pathways Library has a simple recipe. Combine the library, staff, community members, youth, food and drink, Internet and music = youth who choose to visit a library. The community gains a relevant collection, youth who call the library “my library”, mutual respect for all, a thriving volunteer community with a healthy age mix, a positive example of

cross generational interaction and youth who are developing information literacy, leadership and organisational skills (without consciously knowing it).

Youth, who participate in programs such as Loud @ Pathways Library, now know when they have a question, the library will have the answer.

## Attachment 1.

### Tips for working with teenagers

1. **Be friendly** – teenagers can be scary - on their own or in groups. Nothing disarms, relaxes and reassures a scary teenager like consistent friendliness, approachability and genuine interest.
2. **Greet them** by name if you know it – say hello, just as you would with other customers. And also say goodbye.

Acknowledge that you can **see** them and they are not invisible and if you don't know their names find out. Everyone responds well to people who "know them".

3. **Find a way to say YES** - don't start by saying NO, try to find ways of making things happen. If part of their idea sounds doable say "let's start with ... , and I'll get back to you on..." If you not sure say "let me look into that".

**Also check your signage** - Is it positive? Do your signs say "Do ...", or are they written in the negative eg, "Don't do ...", "No ... allowed". Negative signage will deter teenagers. Try to write signs in the positive.

4. **Think the best of them (innocent until proven guilty)** –Treat teenagers as welcome and valued visitors to your library regardless of how they look or their unsocial body language.
5. **You only need 2 rules** - respect each other (which includes staff and other customers) & respect resources.

Speak to teenagers as you would like to be spoken to. If you have a problem with something that they are doing eg, swearing (often unconsciously), start the discussion at around "3" on the Richter scale. If you start at "10" you have nowhere left to go.

6. **Why?** – When you are applying the above 2 rules make sure that you explain why eg, "I shouldn't ride my skateboard around in the library because?" - it might get stolen, one of your mates might hide it, an elderly patron might accidentally knock you off it, etc. If a problem recurs start thinking about solutions eg, have somewhere where they can safely store their transportation eg, skateboards and scooters, while in the library.
7. **Listen and learn** - teenagers have got a lot of good ideas, ask their opinions about the collections, our services – how they think we could improve them (all collections and services not just teenage). Ask and involve them in what's going on in the library.
8. **Ask if there is something you can assist them with** if they look lost – Teenagers do laps and waste heaps of time because they are reluctant to ask for help. If they need help they usually leave it until 5 minutes before they "have to go". Try to be proactive and pick up when they have done 3 laps of the non fiction. Maybe they can't find what they are looking for?

9. and **follow up** with genuine interest – if you help someone, next time they come into the library follow up – if you helped them with a school assignment or presentation ask them how it went. As you get to know them find out more about their lives, make appropriate enquires eg; if you know that they had a birthday party ask them how it went.
10. however, **be sensitive to place and time** - unless you know them well, don't embarrass them by asking how their homework assignment is going, or trying to do the big “sell” when they are relaxing socially with friends. To begin with, when they are with their friends let them make the first move to include you in the conversation – then you’ll know you’re welcome.
11. **Great collections and great spaces** – make sure your teenage area is well maintained and as attractive and as comfortable as it can be.

Make collection recommendations to your Branch Librarian, who will then pass this info on to the Collection Development Librarian (Cheryl Clarke) eg, more graphic novels, Zines, CDs, Videos, DVDs, magazines, talking books, and books.  
Display collections face-out – at least one fiction row per bay should be display.

12. **Attractive to boys** – Does your teen space appeal to boys? Are there blokey books on display? Is the décor gender neutral? Girls will use the resources and the space regardless. Make sure that your displays and environment are boy friendly.
13. **Let them get to know you and what you do** – share appropriate information about yourself with them – “my favourite online game is Warcraft”, “my son uses the skatebowl at Brendale”. Also tell them about all the different things that you do, how much you enjoy it, how much you enjoy working with them.
14. also **show you know** - or that you know how to find out – teenagers are smart and they respect smart, it’s important to be confident and knowledgeable.
15. and when working with young people **maximise resources** - staff, materials, effort eg, get everybody working together on the same homework topic, on ideas generation, etc.
16. **Reward** - good behaviour, acknowledge positive behaviour and success with praise, extra attention.
17. **Moment of truth** – young people’s experience in your library can decide their future use of libraries, make sure that you are going to be one of those great librarians that they talk to their children about.
18. **Relax - and enjoy yourself** - If you are relaxed and having a good time then they will also relax and have a good time.

**Check out websites –**

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/teenreading/tipsenc/tipsencourage.htm>  
<http://www.insideadog.com.au/>