Libraries are community hubs, of course, but in Oshawa, they're providing unparalleled access to technology, too
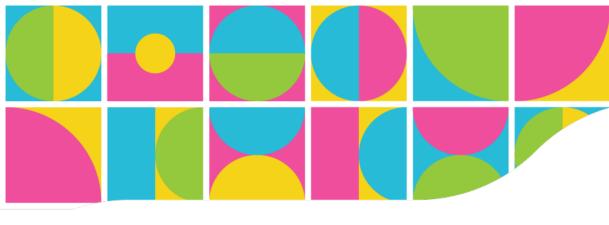
By Jennifer Foden

Libraries around the world are widely recognized as important community hubs, where they do everything from provide resources like books and the Internet to offer programming like tutoring and job search help. However, in Oshawa, the largest city in Durham Region, the library is helping bring people closer to technology.

On the lower level of the McLaughlin Branch, the largest of the city's four locations, is the library's Makerspace. It's used by everyone from teachers and students, community groups like Scouts, individual families and more. In the 330-square-foot room, there's a Smart Board, an interactive screen with games and musical instruments; a Makey Makey, an invention kit that introduces kids and adults to circuit boards; a 3D printer, where customers can make everything from keychains to earrings to replacement parts for Lego sets or drones; an Ozobot, to show people basic coding; a VR headset and more.

And while the other three Oshawa Library locations don't have a dedicated Makerspace; they do have access to all of the same technology. The librarians take the technology into the community, too, like to schools and seniors' centres. "This gentleman, he was about 90 years old and he wanted to try it out [virtual reality headset]. And he was able to sit himself in the backyard of his house in Scotland where he grew up," says Beckie MacDonald, manager of the McLaughlin Branch.

Upstairs at McLaughlin, they have everything from gaming stations for teens to a touch-screen kiosk that provides information on support for food, shelter and financial aid within Durham. And then there's the memory lab, where people can bring in older technology—VHS, vinyl, physical photographs, audio cassettes, et cetera—and convert them to digital files. The library is also in the middle of a huge digitization project themselves: all of the newspapers in Durham Region. "All searchable; you can find your grandparents' wedding announcement," says MacDonald.

And while there is a ton of technology at the library available to the residents of Durham Region, there's digital literacy available, too. They run plenty of programming on how to use the tech available inside the library's walls—like how to use the memory lab or 3D printer—as well as things like how AI is changing the world, using an e-wallet, preparing digital travel documents and more. "There's a large demographic who still needs help with basic computer services," says Jen Clark, manager of programming and community engagement at Oshawa Public Libraries. "And with the world moving to a digital format, we are sort of that bridge for them."

You can also make appointments with librarians for tech help. "We also have a tech help desk that sits right in the lobby and we have it staffed so people who don't want to make an appointment can just walk in and bring their laptop or their phone or their e-reader, whatever it is," says Clark. And they loan out connect kits, too, which include a tablet and hotspot. "We have a lot of families and single people who don't have access to the Internet, so we loan out the connect kits for six weeks at a time," says Erica Wong, customer service librarian at the McLaughlin Branch. "A lot of people use it to job search or for their kids to do research."

"Libraries need to be ahead of the [technology] trend," says MacDonald. "[They need to] be comfortable and knowledgeable with all sorts of new technologies and tools as the community comes to us to help them troubleshoot and learn."

This is part of a 10-article series profiling the innovation happening in Durham Region. The region has been recognized as one of the top seven Intelligent Communities in the world for the third year in a row. Learn more at durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities and IntelligentCommunity.org.