

East Village

Magazine

October 2023



Photograph By

Edwin D. Carter

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Commentary

What lies ahead for Flint's colleges? - Centennials, conflict, change, and challenges

By Paul Rozycki

The University of Michigan-Flint has a new chancellor; Mott Community College's president is applying for a position in Kentucky; Kettering University has a new vice president, is looking to a "transformational decade"; and, since 2005, the Flint Community Schools have had eight superintendents and are facing dramatically declining enrollment while dealing with empty and crumbling school buildings.

It may be time for Flint's educational institutions to hit the books (or the laptops). With all the recent changes and threats, it may be time to cram for a pop quiz or -- hopefully not -- a final exam.

The University of Michigan-Flint

In recent months, as reported by East Village Magazine, the University of Michigan-Flint has been dealing with the conflict over a potential transition from a liberal arts university to one oriented to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) and career preparation. Chancellor Debashish Dutta left for a new position at the University of Illinois, and a new leader, Donna Fry, a faculty member and Dean of the College of Health Sciences, has taken the helm as the transition is on a temporary hold. After nearly a decade of decline, enrollment is showing some growth this semester but many of the conflicts and concerns still remain.

Mott Community College

As Mott Community College celebrates its centennial this year, the 100 year anniversary has come with new challenges as well. Mott's first

woman and first African-American president, Dr. Beverly Walker-Griffiea announced that she was a finalist for the presidency of the Kentucky Community and Technical College. If she had been chosen she would have left in January of 2024. After nearly a decade as Mott's president, she led the college to adopt a greater commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in many of the college's programs. That hasn't happened without friction from some college employees and a newly elected and often divided Board of Trustees. College enrollment is up after the pandemic but clearly there are challenges and changes that Mott will be facing as it begins its second century.

Kettering University

Kettering University celebrated its 100th year in 2019 and its president, Robert McMahan, called for "A Transformational Decade" after the pandemic, the changes with General Motors, and the water crisis in Flint. Kettering has made major investments and commitments to the neighborhood around the Flint campus, boosted its financial fundraising, and reorganized its academic degrees and departments. Kettering's new Learning Commons was built with the aim of revitalizing cooperative learning and creativity.

Flint Community Schools

Beyond the changes facing higher education in Genesee County, the Flint Community Schools have been dealing with a dramatic decline

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Cover: house on Kensington St. proudly decked out for Halloween



Photo of the Month: a mural painted on Totem Books' building (Photo by Edwin D. Custer)

Taliah Abdullah, new library director: "Community is at the heart of who I am"

By Canisha Bell and Jan Worth-Nelson

"I believe in community – community is at the heart of who I am as an individual, what I believe in and why I became a librarian."

That's how Taliah Abdullah, executive director of the Gloria Coles Flint Public Library since July 24, described her commitments and values in a wide-ranging recent interview with *East Village Magazine*.

Abdullah, finishing her second month as the library's top executive, said one of her most important priorities as she delves into her work is listening -- listening to how the people of the community are using the library, how they would like to use it, and how to join in future conver-

sations of "shared visioning."

Settling in to her fifth floor apartment with her golden doodle in one of downtown's old buildings, Abdullah said she finds Flint "amazing and very welcoming."

"I walk out the door and decide which direction I'm walking in, just to be able to learn the city. As I meet people I'm asking them for recommendations of where I should go or do. I've found everyone to be so welcoming."

And as for her role in the library, "My vision is to have some community conversations and together [with the community] talk about what does the library mean to you, as an individual --

and how can the library support you and your family?"

She anticipates having those conversations both inside the library and through outreach into the community. "What I'm doing now is figuring out who are those people that I need to talk to" – both community leaders and those who do not yet have a seat at the table," she said.

In an hour-long conversation, Abdullah talked about the history of her passion for literacy and libraries, the future of the book and reading, the implications of book banning, and most of all, how to make sure the library, reopened in 2022 after a transformative \$21 million

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Abdullah ...

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renovation, is an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Library love started early

Abdullah's love of libraries began early in life. Growing up as one of six children—four girls and two boys—in Champaign, IL, she said, "I was at the library like once a week. We had a neighborhood branch and we had our main branch. ... Our parents took us there every week—it was just part of what we did."

Following her passion for literacy, she began her college career in elementary education. She said she did not realize then that librarianship could be a career.

But something significant changed all that. While student teaching at an elementary school in Champaign, IL, Abdullah met, for the first time, an African American school librarian. Her name was Dorothy Vickers-Shelley. She told Abdullah she could be a librarian, that there was a career available for something she already loved.

For the first time, Abdullah said, she could see herself, as an African American, in that role.

It was "huge. HUGE," Abdullah recalled.

"I finished my student teaching that semester and enrolled in library school the next semester. ... I chose elementary education [for undergrad] because I knew that I wanted to do something with literacy, but once I found librarianship was a career opportunity I knew that's where I wanted to be."

She always remembered that life-changing librarian, and went back

years later to thank her for "this amazing career that she really helped me to realize." Vickers-Shelley has since died, but her legacy continues to be honored.

Reflecting on her career trajectory, Abdullah said "Working as a school librarian was definitely in my top three careers that I've had—being the heart of the school, knowing the names of all the children, knowing the families, supporting the educators."

But the transition to a public library system in Colorado opened up other doors, preparing Abdullah for the opportunities she sees ahead in Flint.

What about the book?

She said she knows that while the future of the book may mean differing formats and different platforms, reading itself is far from going out of style.



Taliah Abdullah sitting down for an interview with *East Village Magazine*

(Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson)

"People are always reading," she said. "The format is just different. ... Young people on social media are reading posts--that's considered reading. As people are playing video games, might have to read instructions—that's reading.

"So I think books will always be here—people are going through a transition of how they are engaging with books.

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Education Beat

mixed results on post-pandemic assessment data for area schools

By Harold C. Ford

Area student performance in the first post-pandemic year, 2022-2023, offers a mixture of good and bad news, according to data provided by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), with Flint students showing a small gain in one area and losses in two others.

In all three cases, however, Flint area student performances were far below state percentages, consistent with the numbers before the pandemic.

Data collected during 2022-2023 roughly showed an equivalent number of area schools posting gains and losses in the following categories: proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA) at the end of third grade; Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) total score; and SAT college and career readiness benchmarks.

Flint area students showed a small increase in ELA proficiency, from seven to nine percent; a decline in SAT scores from 775 to 750 -- compared to a state-wide average of 960 and 958 respectively; and career readiness at 5 percent, down from 10 percent in 2021-22.

The MDE is reporting results of some recent assessments in “key education areas” for public and charter schools in : during the year. Voluminous assessment data is available at the MDE MI School Data website.

After suspension of some assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic era – roughly 2019-20 through 2020-2121 – several suspended assessments resumed in 2022-23 school year in Michigan. Some of the most recent data for many area schools and districts are reported in the table found below.

Many educators would argue that language arts mastery is essential

for success in other subject areas. SAT scores that include “college and career readiness benchmarks” may signal success, or lack thereof, at the end of students’ elementary and secondary school years.

Some of the most recent assessment data, collected and reported below, begins with an average of all educational units in the state, followed by averaged data culled from public school systems in Genesee County (including public charter schools), then data from Flint Community Schools – the object of most of this magazine’s coverage of K-12 schools – and, thereafter, other schools and districts within the jurisdiction of the Genesee Intermediate School District. (Data below are rounded off to the nearest whole number. A plus sign (+) indicates an improvement over the previous reporting year; a negative sign (-) indicates a decline over the previous year; the absence of a plus or negative sign means the scores remained the same.

STUDENTS PROFICIENT IN ELA AT THE END OF THIRD GRADE

	2021-22	2022-23
<u>All ISDs*, districts, schools in Michigan</u>	42%	41%
<u>All school districts in Genesee ISD</u>	35%	35%
<u>Flint</u>	7%	9%

STUDENT PROFICIENCY LEVELS IN GENESEE COUNTY DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

10 percent or less:
Flint+; Beecher-; Northridge

Academy-; Richfield Academy+;
Greater Heights Academy+;
Eagle’s Nest Academy+

11-20 percent:

Genesee-; Westwood Heights+;
Grand Blanc Academy; International Academy+; New Standard Academy+; Mt. Morris+

21-30 percent:

Bendle-; Lakeville-;
Burton Glen Academy-;
Flint Cultural Center Academy-

31-40 percent:

Atherton+; Bentley+;
Carman-Ainsworth-; Kearsley+;
Montrose-; Swartz Creek; Linden Charter Academy+;
Madison Academy+

41-50 percent:

Clio-; Flushing+; Goodrich-;
Grand Blanc-

51-60 percent:

Davison-; Fenton-; Lake Fenton-;
Linden-

Schools that posted double-digit declines include:

Northridge Academy (-27) and Bendle (-11). Schools that posted double-digit improvements: Linden Charter Academy (+16) and Westwood Heights (+11).

SAT TOTAL SCORE

	2021-22	2022-23
<u>All ISDs, districts, schools in Michigan</u>	960	958

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Ed Beat ...

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All school districts in Genesee ISD

933 925

Flint

776 750

SAT SCORES IN GENESEE COUNTY DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

700-799:

Flint-; Westwood Heights+; New Standard Academy-; WAY Academy-
Madison Academy-

800-899:

Atherton-; Beecher+;
Bendle+; Bentley+; Carman
Ainsworth+; Genesee+;
Montrose+; Mt. Morris+;
Flex High School of Michigan+;
International Academy+;

900-999:

Clio+; Davison+; Flushing-; Goodrich-; Grand Blanc-; Kearsley-;
Lakeville-; Linden-; Swartz Creek-

1000+:

Fenton+; Lake Fenton+

Schools that posted double-digit declines include:

WAY Academy (-54); Goodrich (-46); Atherton (-40); New Standard Academy (-39); Mt. Morris (-33); Flint (-26); Lakeville (-26); Flushing (-23); Carman-Ainsworth (-22); Swartz Creek (-14); Grand Blanc (-13); and Linden (-10).

Schools that posted double-digit improvements:

Beecher (+45); Davison (+41); Clio (+33); International Academy (+28); Kearsley (+16); Bentley (+13); Fenton (+12); and Westwood Heights (+12).

SAT COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS BENCHMARK

2021-22

2022-23

All ISDs, districts, schools in Michigan

28% 28%

All school districts in Genesee ISD

22% 21%

Flint

<=10% <=5%

SAT COLLEGE, CAREER READINESS BENCHMARKS IN GENESEE COUNTY DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS:

10 percent or less:

Flint-; Atherton-; Bendle-; Carman-Ainsworth-; Genesee-; Mt. Morris-; Westwood Heights-; International Academy-; Madison Academy-

11-20 percent:

Beecher; Bentley+; Lakeville-; Swartz Creek-; Montrose; Flex High School of Michigan

21-30 percent:

Clio+; Flushing+; Goodrich-; Grand Blanc+; Kearsley+

31-40 percent:

Davison+; Fenton+; Lake Fenton+

41 percent or more (maybe):

New Standard Academy+;
WAY Academy

Goodrich posted a double-digit decline (-14) and, perhaps, International Academy (<=20% in 2020-21 to <=10% in 2021-22*).

No area schools posted a double-digit improvement.

[*Keys to abbreviations above: ISD, Intermediate School district; <=, less than or equal to.]

The value of assessments

The value of broad educational assessments, including testing, is vigorously debated in the education profession and elsewhere in society. Charges of bias – cultural, socioeconomic, and otherwise – in educational assessments are persistent. The MDE has responded to some of that criticism with the inclusion of data that had not been reported in earlier decades – data such as “Culture of Learning” (“free and reduced lunch participation”, “economically disadvantaged students”), “Value for Money” (“average class size K-3”, “instructional expenditures per pupil”), and “Salary Data” (for teachers, principals, and superintendents).

Despite the criticisms of standardized testing, many – government officials, educators, parents, students, and others – want to know how their schools are doing in terms of educating children. After all, billions of taxpayer dollars from three levels of government – Federal, state, and local – as well as sources of funding from other entities (foundations, donors, etc.) help fund education and many citizens are curious about the effectiveness of financial investments in education.

Plentiful choices

Beyond funding and accountability issues, parents today have plentiful choices in terms of where to send their children to school. Publicly available data, including assessments, can help in the decision-making process. The options for present-day parents in Genesee County have never been more plentiful that these explanations only account for about two-thirds of students who have left public schools since the fall of 2019.”

EVM Education Beat reporter
Harold C. Ford can be reached at
hcford1185@gmail.com.

Rozycki commentary ...

(Continued from Page 3)

in enrollments, empty buildings, and continuing conflicts in the Flint Board of Education, as has been well documented in Harold Ford's reporting for *East Village Magazine*. Ironically, the empty and crumbling Flint Central High School building, once the premier high school in the city, is also a century old this year -- it was the initial home to Flint Junior College, now Mott Community College. Over two-thirds of the students in Flint attend schools other than Flint Community Schools. A recent U.S. News and World Report survey ranked the top 50 high schools in Michigan. None of them were in Genesee County. Of the top 100 high schools in the nation only three were from Michigan.

Statewide challenges

Beyond the local centennials and challenges, higher education in Michigan in general is also facing a daunting future. Though enrollments are up a bit this semester, in recent years nearly every college in Michigan, except for the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Michigan State University in East Lansing, and Michigan Tech in the U.P, has seen a decline in student numbers.

45,000 fewer students

Some of those losses have been dramatic. Central Michigan University saw a 48 percent decline in student numbers since 2002 and closed four of its dorms as a result. Eastern Michigan University sold the building that once housed its business college and gave its dorms to a private developer in exchange for new buildings. Other campuses can tell similar stories. The cause is both a decline in the number of students graduating from high school in the state and fewer of those students choosing to go to college. By one estimate today, there are 45,000 fewer students attending college in Michigan than 10 years ago. Many predict that trend will continue for at least another decade, and that most Michigan

colleges and universities will need to make difficult decisions about staffing and tuition if the declines continue.

A national issue

The challenges to colleges and universities isn't just an issue in Flint and in Michigan. It's a national issue as well. In a recent article in the New York Times Magazine, education writer Paul Tough discussed the declining interest in college education nationwide. He attributes it to the rising cost of college for most students and the fear that a college education may not "pay off." at least for those who begin but fail to earn a degree. For some who complete technical or scientific degrees the evidence shows there is a clear financial advantage, even with the college debt. But for many other degrees the financial advantage is less certain, and some who pursue a trade outside of college may do as well financially over a lifetime. The dramatic increase in college costs and college debt is due to many factors; the decline in state support for colleges and universities is a major one. By the end of last year, student debt totaled more than \$1.7 trillion, and the average student debt was over \$30,000 at graduation.

According to Tough, this has led to a decline in the number of undergraduates, from about 18 million a decade ago to about 15.5 million today. This may be a result of both the higher cost of a college education today as well as the changing demographics of our population. But like so many things today, there is also a political element. In the age of Trump more than a few see college as place for the "liberal elite" and choose to avoid it for political reasons. A recent Gallup survey showed that only 36 percent of Americans are confident in higher education, down 20 points from 2015. While most other industrialized nations are seeing an increase in college graduates, the United States is seeing its graduates shrink as the need increases.

The next 100 years

Colleges, universities and all educational institutions have faced

challenges and changes over the last century. They will need to do the same for the next 100 years. Flint's colleges and universities have responded and led during all the changes we've seen here in Michigan. The path may not be easy or painless, but they need to be a positive force for the future as well.

EVM Political Commentator Paul Rozycki can be reached at paul.rozycki@mcc.edu.

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Abdullah ...

(Continued from Page 5)

For some people, myself included, the print book will always be near and dear to them.

“The nice thing about that is that we have so many different opportunities for people to engage with reading, whether that’s a traditional print copy, or reading from your phone, or ebooks or audio books. I love a print copy, and – I also love listening to books, or have somebody read to me – I love to have a narrator.”

Nurturing the joy of reading

Part of nurturing a love of reading, she suggested, has to do with how students are invited into the pleasures of it.

“There is something with our educational system where sometimes we do young people a disservice, when people get away from reading because they are forced to read certain material because the things they have to read are not engaging -- or their schoolwork keeps them so busy that they don’t have time for pleasurable reading.

“I see my role as a public librarian is to have conversations with educators – just to get them to think about the joy of reading, and fostering and encouraging the joy of reading in students. One important aspect of that, she suggested, is what reading looks like after high school.

“After people are not as busy... sometimes people come back to the library after high school, when people don’t have to do the formal learning, when they don’t HAVE to do the expected reading. It’s important for parents, caregivers, educators to think expansively about reading – people should be able to read whatever they want without judgement.”

Book bans are “destructive”

Abdullah spoke out strongly on the implication of book bans.

“I believe very strongly in intellectual freedom,” she said. “People should be free, should be able to receive the information that they need.

“We know that not everything is for everyone, and I should be free to make that choice of what I need, and you should be free to make the choice of what you need. So just because I may not be interested in a certain topic or a particular book, okay, that shouldn’t impact your ability to have access to that information. I believe very strongly in access to information, and that that is a personal decision.”

“Book bans are destructive,” she said. “They’re destructive for people’s

necessary information to help them live their healthiest, most fulfilled lives, you’re impacting people’s ability to live the way that they need to live.

There’s “a level of privilege” at play for people who choose to participate in book bans, she said, and that extends into cultural implications.

The “erasure” of history: that’s what book banning does, she asserted, along with the erasure of information for people who want it – for example, people who are finding their way related to identity.

“If they are unable to see themselves in the library, in literature, and choose to get it somewhere else, we have to deal with the misinformation. At least if it’s in the library, it’s accurate. There’s a skill to be able to navigate the internet – all resources are not the same.”

Addressing the intimidation factor

Part of Abdullah’s job, she acknowledges, is helping penetrate the “intimidation factor” of coming into the library.

“Even for me who’s comfortable in libraries, who’s comfortable in most spaces, it can be intimidating,” she observed. But she has plans to address that.

“You have to have staff who are welcoming, who make eye contact with you when you walk in the door... my vision internally for us as a library team is that we are greeting people when they walk in the door, we’re acknowledging people –

“There’s something about being seen that creates a sense of value... walking people where they need to go, not just pointing. That’s the foundation :a welcoming, inclusive, accessible space, and it starts with our staff members, it starts with having that shared expectation.

“I want us to be that space where you walk in, you feel seen, you feel valued,



Abdullah: Fostering the joy of reading

(Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson)

access – and book bans often impact marginalized groups.”

So far the Flint library system has been spared attacks from book banners, and Abdullah is clear: When book bans hit libraries, the implications can be dire. Historically, she said, libraries impact underserved groups, “and so, if we’re taking material away where people can see themselves... where they can get

(Continued on Page 11)

THIS MONTH IN THE VILLAGE

A selection of events available to our readers is highlighted — beginning after our publication date of Oct. 6. It's a sampling of opportunities in the city. To submit events for our November issue, email info about your event to pisenber@gmail.com by Oct. 26.

Flint Institute of Arts

Now through Dec. 30 the FIA presents "American Realism: Visions of America 1900-1950." features works on paper, paintings and sculpture capturing the evolving experience of 20th Century America. Well-known artists will be featured. Women and artist of color active during this period will be emphasized for a deeper look into the stories and lives of the era.

Sun., Oct. 26, 6-8:45 p.m.

"Night of the Living Dead" and "Eraserhead" will be shown in the FIA theater.

Cost: FIA members \$6, general admission \$7, and FOMA members \$5

Flint Institute of Arts

1120 E. Kearsley St., Flint

For more info visit flintarts.org or call 810-234-1695.

Ooky Spooky Light Show

Tues.-Sun., now through Halloween, Tues.-Sat. 7 p.m. and Sun. 4 p.m.

Popular Halloween songs like "The Monster Mash," "Ghostbusters," and "Thriller" come to life with amazing graphics and lights. For ages 6 and older.

Tickets: for Genesee residents adults \$8, seniors \$6 and ages 2-11 \$6.

Longway Planetarium

1310 E. Kearsley St., Flint

For more info visit sloanlongway.org, or call 810-237-3400.

MW Gallery presents "Hand in Hand: Fine Art * & Craft"

Now through Jan. 20, 2024

Featuring unique creations by artists who use unusual craft materials and techniques. The exhibit exemplifies the skill and creativity of African diaspora artists.

MW Gallery

111 E. Court St., Flint

For more info call 810-835-4900.

Haunted Flint Bike Tour

Oct. 8 and 21, 3 p.m.

Based on the book "Haunted Flint," the tour will visit several locations in Flint. Listen to ghost stories at your stops. Duration of the tour is 1.5-2 hours.

Cost: adults (21 and over) \$15, seniors (65+) \$12, and children (5-17) \$10.

Flint City Bike Tours

300 E. First St., Flint

For more info visit flintcitybiketours.com.

Knee-High Naturalist: Leaves, Autumn's Painters

Oct. 10, 1-2:30 p.m.

Kids will learn about the changing leaves and create artwork with leaves. Pre-registration required by Oct. 9. Suggested for ages 3 to 6. Adult must accompany children.

Cost: \$5 per student.

For-Mar Nature Preserve & Arboretum

2142 N. Genesee Rd., Burton

For more info visit geneseecountyparks.org/for-mar-nature-preserve or call 810-736-7100.

2nd Friday ArtWalk

Oct. 13, 6-9 p.m.

Walk around downtown Flint and enjoy open house receptions, food, music and art for sale or just to look at.

Free

Greater Flint Arts Council

816 S. Saginaw St., Flint

For more info visit greaterflintartscouncil.org or call 810-238-ARTS (2787).

Brahms & Beethoven

Oct. 14, 7-9:30 p.m.

The Flint Symphony Orchestra kicks off its 2023-24 season with masterworks from Brahms and Beethoven.

Cost: \$15-\$65.

The Whiting

1241 Kearsley St., Flint

Call 810-237-3443 or visit

thewhiting.org/event/brahms-%26-beethoven/3454.

Gloria Coles Flint Public Library

Oct. 14, 11 am-12 p.m.

Families with children can bring their dolls or teddy bears and a blanket to enjoy iced tea outside at the Gardening Together Tea Party. Help make the library more beautiful by planting bulbs and take a bulb home.

For more info about the Tea Party, call 810-232-7111 or visit

fpl.info/event/gardening-together-tea-party.

Oct. 19-21.

The Friends of the Flint Public Library annual used book sale will take place Thurs., Oct. 19, 2-7 p.m., Fri., Oct. 20, 12-5 p.m., and Sat., Oct. 21, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

For more info about the book sale, email

friendsoftheflintlibrary@fpl.info

or call 810-767-1516.

fpl.info/event/gardening-together-tea-party.

Gloria Coles Flint Public Library

1026 Kearsley St., Flint

Trunk or Treat

Oct. 26, 4-6 p.m.

Flint Odyssey House and Court Street United Methodist Church presents their 3rd Annual Family Fun Night Trunk or Treat. Stop by the church parking lot for candy, fun and crafts in a safe environment.

Free for families with children ages 7-17.

225 W. Court St., Flint

For more info visit eventbrite.com/e/2023-trunk-or-treat-family-fun-night-tickets-676910867627?aff=ebdssbdestsearch.



Ed Custer's *East Village Magazine* logo is reimaged for each issue by Patsy Isenberg.

Abdullah ...

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you feel celebrated – we want to thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to come into this space...cause there are other spaces that you could be in.”

“Word will spread”

“Word travels,” she noted. “if people have a negative experience, it will be shared widely – it’s important that we have as many positive experiences in the library – when somebody is talking to their family or their neighbor oh, I went to the library and they were



Abdullah meets Gabrielle Wooley during last month’s welcome reception at the Gloria Coles Flint Public Library

(Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson)

so nice...Once people have positive experiences with us in the community... word will spread.”

Though her roots, family and educationally were in Illinois, Abdullah came to Flint from the Arapahoe Library District in Englewood, CO. She has worked in academic, school, and public libraries in multiple states, holding management positions for 20 years.

She said initially Michigan was “not even on my radar before applying for this position. I saw the job posting, came to visit, saw the library and inter-

acted with some staff members here and thought, okay, I can do this.”

And now Flint is her home, and she makes clear she is eager to learn more about it and about what people want from the library.

“I’m really looking forward to the outreach, being able to talk to people...” she said.

“I hope people will take the time to hear my story and learn the library story and allow me to hear their stories. I know how difficult it can be for people to think about an outsider coming in, you know, like ‘what do you know about Flint?’”

But she said she is eager to listen and learn, and is fully committed to finding out, as she stated, “How folks/ community are currently using the library, how they would like to use the library, and to join in future conversations of shared visioning.

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Village Life ...

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ing the body. Rumi was a dervish. He breathed, twirled and spoke his poems while whirling.

(Oh, how I would love to have been at those open mic nights.)

He considered that moving the body was an essential part of the meditation.

He prescribed other kinds of movement as well. In a recent NPR interview, Persian-American Rumi scholar Fatemeh Keshavarz, paraphrased it this way.

“If you don’t plow the earth, it’s going to get so hard nothing grows in it. You just plow the earth of yourself. You just get moving. And even don’t ask exactly what’s going to happen. You allow yourself to move around, and then you will see the benefit.”

The most compelling thing about Rumi is that he is, at heart, all about love. So if we choose to twirl away from despair, in the spirit of Rumi, that means finding a path to practical love.

And a neighborhood can do what one person can’t.

So when I cheered Lil Ed and the Blues Imperials with my neighbors on a recent exuberant musical night at the UM-Flint Theater, or when I see everybody gardening in these past glorious days, all of us out there raking, planting, pruning, or when we’re all getting re-acquainted with each other on our daily walks, pausing at corners to gossip and take in whatever sun the day affords, I think we’re moving, tentatively but undeniably, sweetly and gently, toward hope – resilient and resolute even in the face of a scary and depressing year.

Rumi said, “Get yourself a new language and then you will be able to see a new world.”

So, enough already with “lachrymose.” A pox on “lugubrious.” Let’s keep moving.

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Village Life

Maybe “Acting happy” can make us happy

By Jan Worth-Nelson

[Editor’s note: This is a reprise of a column from East Village Magazine in May, 2009, one of 100 included in Worth-Nelson’s new collection, *That’s My Moon Over Court Street: Dispatches from a Life in Flint*, now available at Totem Bookstore and on Amazon. Rereading it, Worth-Nelson asserts its suggestions might be just as counter-intuitively relevant to us now, if not more so]

Sheepishly, I admit it: two of my favorite words are “lugubrious” and “lachrymose.”

They’re fun to say. I dare you to say them out loud yourself, right now, in Steady Eddy’s or the Lunch Studio [Now Hoffman’s Deco Deli] or Good Beans or wherever you are – lu-gu-brious, excessively mournful, and lach-ry-mose, dolorous, showing sorrow, according to Wordnet. They sound like what they mean.

Say “lugubrious” and the mouth pouts outward, the sides of the face falling. Say “lachrymose” and the throat slightly tightens, as if preparing for a good cry.

But if words are destiny, which as a writer I superstitiously believe, I think I should pull these morose syllables out of service from my personal lexicon, at least for now.

Times are tough, and we need relief. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of being down.

So, I’ll establish myself as the East Village Idiot, once and for all, by declaring that this is a time to be upbeat.

We need to smile at ourselves in the mirror in the morning and say hello. We need to smile at each other and say with gentle confidence, counter-intui-

tively, that things will be all right.

This is not, despite the sound of it, total lunacy. According to a growing body of research, finding a way to “act happy” might actually change our brain chemistry, our immune systems, and in time, improve the way we respond to the stresses of life.

It’s a potent concept - that by choosing what we attend to and what we nurture, we can sometimes change

said his research showed that Buddhists who regularly meditated, were “less likely to be shocked, flustered, surprised or as angry as other people.” In fact, he asserted, the experienced Buddhists in his study had achieved, via meditation and selective attention, what the rest of us so often seem to be short on – happiness.

Mystics and meditators have known this for centuries. As the 13th century Perisan poet Rumi advised, “Water the fruit trees, and don’t water the thorns.”

One of my heroes is psychology superstar Martin Seligman, who coined the phrase “learned happiness.”

A self-described pessimist, Seligman first achieved notice with his gloomy but path-finding concept of “learned helplessness,” in which his experiments suggested that people whose attempts to escape punishment were continually thwarted eventually gave up trying, even after obstacles were lifted.

Does that sound like your depressed neighbor, or even you, at 4 a.m.?

Now, trying to turn the focus of how we think about mental health from pathology to wellbeing, Seligman is fruitfully noting that people can learn to change – and become happier. This turns out to be something that a whole community must consider. As a solely individual matter, it can be impossible to sustain.

As he told Time Magazine in 2005, “We needed to ask, what are the enabling conditions that make human beings flourish?”

Rumi’s ideas about getting to happiness called for, among other things, the brilliantly simple notion of mov-



Missing one hand, the Buddha still smiles in Worth-Nelson’s back yard

(Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson)

what happens.

According to studies by Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence, and others by Paul Ekman at the University of California - San Francisco, for example, the action is in the amygdala, an area of the brain known to be the hub of “fear memory.”

In a 2003 BBC interview, Ekman

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