

County library system head stepping down

By JANENE HOLZBERG

For The Baltimore Sun

Jim Robey recalls the first one-on-one meeting he had with Valerie Gross, in 2001 after she took the reins of the Howard County Library System.

Gross, whose final day as president and CEO of the county's network of six public library branches will be Aug. 31, had a direct request for Robey, who was in his third year as a two-term Howard County executive:

Would he transfer the library budget from the county's community services department, and instead place it under education?

Robey agreed, acknowledging it would make it more difficult to make a reduction to the library system when such an action translated to a cut to education.

"That change made it a lot harder to attack the libraries' budget" when cost-cutting measures were necessary, he said.

It was a request that immediately gave him insight to his new library director's vision.

"Valerie had a level of excitement about looking to the future that I'd never seen before," said Robey, who retired in 2015 after eight years as a Democratic state senator and earlier in his career had served as Howard County police chief.

"We've all perceived libraries as a 'shhh!' place with librarians looking over their glasses," he said. "Valerie opened my eyes to how much the libraries have in common with our great schools. They're not just for entertainment; they're for education."

Or as Gross herself puts it: "We are education in our own right."

Tom Munns, an Ellicott City resident and Library Board of Trustees member since 2012, said the county has been "lucky to have Valerie at the helm" and that she enjoys "strong recognition among her peers, legislators and beyond."

Among Gross' accomplishments, Munns pointed to the system being named Library of the Year in 2013 by Gale and Library Journal from among 21,000 public and academic libraries in North America.

"Her vision is part of her strength, but she's also assembled a very strong team that will function well after she departs," Munns said.

A search is underway to replace Gross, who is returning to the San Francisco bay area with her husband, musician and real estate investor Tri Nguyen. The process



KARL MERTON FERRON/BALTIMORE SUN

Valerie Gross is leaving her position as CEO and president of the Howard County Library System. "Is it going to be hard to let go?" she said. "Yes and no."

was delayed at the beginning of the month when one of the two finalists dropped out of consideration.

Munns said a definitive timeline is not yet in place for naming a new director.

Then and now

Gross has overseen transformative change since her arrival in Howard County.

In 2001, the library system had an operating budget of \$8.8 million; this year it is \$23.3 million.

While the county's population has increased 27 percent from 250,000 residents to 317,000 during Gross' tenure, the number of borrowed items more than doubled from 3.6 million to 8 million. Library visits did the same, going from 934,000 to 2 million during those years.

Annual attendance at classes and events has more than quadrupled in 16 years, from 73,000 participants to 340,000.

Renovations and expansions at several

branches — along with newly constructed buildings at the Miller branch in Ellicott City in 2011 and coming next year to Elkridge — will mean 142,000 square feet of space has been added to the library system.

She instituted the Battle of the Books, mounted the Choose Civility initiative — complete with ubiquitous green car magnets — and opened the Enchanted Garden at the Miller branch, among other unique programs.

Now Gross is focused on new challenges. She has lined up consultant work and will also lead workshops and give speeches at state and national conferences across the country.

She is writing a manual of sorts for community organizations interested in launching their own Choose Civility initiatives that will be titled, "Civility Goes Viral: Creating a Culture, Leading the Way." It has a projected October 2018 release date.

Yet even as her calendar fills up, the decision to move on remains bittersweet.

"Is it going to be hard to let go? Yes and no," she said. "No, because the culture

here is strong and will continue. The ideas that come from a new leader will add a new flavor and will move the library forward and upward.

"And yes, because I have taken great pride in developing that culture and firmly believe in our vision for keeping it center stage," she said.

Phillip Dodge, chairman of the newly renamed Friends & Foundation of HCLS, said Gross' main contribution has been making the library system about more than just books.

"With the Internet [for research], some people have said libraries will become things of the past," said Dodge, who is also executive director of the Downtown Columbia Partnership.

"But Valerie has made them a hub of community learning and lifelong education — and that's kind of brilliant and audacious," he said. "For her it came down to asking, 'Why not?' instead of 'Why?'"

Early in her tenure Gross changed the title of librarian to research specialist or instructor.

The change, she said, was calculated to bring about a difference in how library patrons view the role of staff in self-directed education, research assistance and instruction, and enlightening experiences — the three pillars of her Libraries = Education philosophy.

She said such "strategic vocabulary" was designed to "replace language that trivialized our work" at the library.

Libraries "must continue to position ourselves to obtain an accurate, perceived value of what we already are," Gross said. "Equal footing with other educational institutions is crucial to our success."

County Executive Alan Kittleman said the library system "certainly has a role to play in education."

He praised Gross' A+ Partnerships program, a formal agreement she launched in her first year on the job that brings together the library system, school system and Howard Community College to focus on students' academic success.

But he pointed to her reimagining of libraries as community gathering places as her signature contribution.

"You technically don't have to go to the library to get a book. If libraries had stayed the way they've always been, we wouldn't need brick-and-mortar buildings," he said.

"Valerie saw what was coming with the changing technology and understood how to adapt the library to make a greater impact on the county," Kittleman said. "That's her legacy."