

# How Memphis Created the Nation's Most Innovative Public Library

[S smithsonianmag.com/innovation/memphis-created-nations-innovative-public-library-180978844](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/memphis-created-nations-innovative-public-library-180978844)

Richard Grant

Innovation | November 2021

You can play the ukulele, learn photography or record a song in a top-flight studio. You can also check out a book



Award-winning filmmaker Janay Kelley honed her skills in the video lab in Cloud901. The state-of-the-art teen learning facility is one of the biggest and best of its kind.

Ariel Cobbert

By Richard Grant

Photographs by Ariel Cobbert

The Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, a building of pale concrete and greenish glass, rises four stories in midtown Memphis. Walking through its automatic doors on a weekday afternoon, I hear unexpected sounds, muffled but unmistakable, almost shocking in a library context: the deep, quaking bass beats of Memphis hip-hop, plus a faint whine of power tools cutting through metal.

It's difficult to summarize the myriad changes taking place in American public libraries, but one thing is certain. Libraries are no longer hushed repositories of books. Here at the Central branch in Memphis, ukulele flash mobs materialize and seniors dance the fox trot in upstairs rooms. The library hosts U.S. naturalization ceremonies, job fairs, financial literacy seminars, jazz concerts, cooking classes, film screenings and many other events—more than 7,000 at last count. You can check out books and movies, to be sure, but also sewing machines, bicycle repair kits and laptop computers. And late fees? A thing of the past.

The hip-hop beats and power tool noise are coming from an 8,300-square-foot teenage learning facility called Cloud901 (the numerals are the Memphis area code). Two stories high, it contains a state-of-the-art recording studio staffed by a professional audio engineer, a robotics lab that fields a highly competitive team in regional and national championships, and a video lab where local teens have made award-winning films. Cloud901 also features a fully equipped maker space (a kind of DIY technology innovation workshop), a performance stage, a hang-out area and an art studio.





Memphis Public Library director Keenon McCloy and Mayor Jim Strickland. He credits McCloy with making the city's branches the talk of Libraryland. Ariel Cobbett



Members of the Cossitt Library staff. Seated, from left: Emily Marks, Toni Braswell, Ashia Hardaway. Standing: Sha-michael Hallman, Njeri Robinson. Ariel Cobbert



Cloud901's maker space is equipped with such high-tech tools as laser cutters and 3-D printers. The workshop is open to all ages, not just teens. Ariel Cobbert

Over the last two decades, as digital technology and the internet became dominant, public libraries have been increasingly described as obsolete, and many cities have slashed their library budgets and closed branches. Memphis, Tennessee, one of the poorest cities in the nation, chose instead to invest, recently opening three new branches, for a total of 18, and increasing the library budget from \$15 million in 2007 to almost \$23 million today. Attendance at library programs has quadrupled in the last six years. In 2019, before the pandemic, more than 7,000 people attended the annual Bookstock festival, a celebration of literacy and education. Memphis Public Libraries (MPL) is the only public library system in the country with its own television and radio station, and its branches receive more than two million visits a year.

“How did this happen?” I asked Mayor Jim Strickland, who is serving his second term in office. He was sitting in his seventh-floor office with a view of downtown and the Mississippi River. “I’m a strong believer in libraries as a force for good,” he said. “But none of this would

have happened without our library director Keenon McCloy. She is amazing. We've got library people coming from all over the country to see what she's done here."

---

McCloy is high-energy, fit from running, always busy, sometimes frenetic. Though passionate about public libraries, she has no training in the highly specialized field of librarianship, not even an undergrad degree in library science, and this provoked dismay and even uproar when she took over the Memphis system in January 2008.

"I was the director of public services and neighborhoods for the city, and the mayor—it was Mayor Herenton at the time—appointed me without doing a search for other candidates," McCloy says over a salad lunch near her office in the Central branch. "It caused quite a stir in Libraryland."

Aggrieved librarians denounced her online and in print as a "crony," "lackey" and "tool of City Hall," complaining she knew nothing about librarianship or its high ethical standards. More than half a dozen library employees resigned, and the Tennessee Library Board issued an open letter condemning Mayor Herenton for placing a political appointee in charge of the department. The mayor responded with notable brevity—"A manager is a manager"—and declined to discuss the matter further.



Ralph Calhoun, Cloud901's audio engineer coordinator, has worked in studios in Memphis and Nashville. He helps aspiring musicians and producers make their own records. Ariel Cobbert



Amanda Willoughby, Cloud901's video lab instructor. Under her mentorship, young people have produced over 100 movies. Ariel Cobbert



Timothy Felix practices at the audio lab, which offers the use of everything from sound isolation booths to professional mixing equipment. Ariel Cobbert

McCloy's first big task was to reorganize the funding and administration of the library system. Then she went looking for advice. She talked with directors from other states and visited acclaimed public libraries. "I wanted to meet the rock stars of Libraryland with the most progressive ideas," McCloy says. "And they all wanted to help me and share what they'd learned, because that's how library people are. No one is proprietary and we're not competitive with each other. We're all about the greater good."

In Chicago, she toured the Harold Washington Library Center, where a 5,500-square-foot facility called YOUmedia opened in 2009. It was the first dedicated teen learning center in an American library, and it had a maker space and an in-house production studio to record

teenage musicians. “That’s where I got the idea for Cloud901,” says McCloy. “People kept saying the biggest problem at the Central library was all the teens hanging around, and I thought, well, they’re in our library, let’s find a way to redirect their energy.”

The next step was to meet with the Memphis Library Foundation, a volunteer fundraising organization with connections in the business community and social elite. “I asked them if they would support a teen center at the Central branch,” says McCloy. “Well, not immediately, but then they started raising money, and we decided to double the expense and really go for it.”

Instead of a basic recording studio, McCloy and her team wanted a professional-quality studio. The legendary Memphis music producer Lawrence “Boo” Mitchell, co-owner of Royal Studios and a longtime supporter of the libraries, agreed to design it. For the maker space, they hired a native Memphian who had been overseeing such facilities in the Bay Area. He stocked the workshop with 3-D printers and other equipment, and brought in FedEx, a Memphis-based corporation, as a supporter. It was the same approach with the video and robotics labs: hire experts, buy the best equipment, recruit sponsors. Cloud901 opened in 2015, at a cost of \$2.175 million.

In 2017 McCloy decided to rebrand the public library system. She met with a local “design thinking” agency, Little Bird Innovation, and a communications and marketing firm, Doug Carpenter and Associates (DCA). The firms embedded researchers in all the library branches and spent six months talking to patrons, former patrons and people who never used the libraries.

“Most people really valued their libraries but viewed them as stable and staid, a repository for the past,” Doug Carpenter says in his office just south of downtown Memphis. A first step to changing that view was to rethink the traditional library card. “The old card was black and white with no design, just information about rules and fines, and it was like getting your parole papers,” he says. “There was no sense of joining something, so we streamlined the application process and designed new cards that look like health-club membership cards.”

Carpenter was highly impressed with the range of services and programs offered by the libraries, but he discovered that most people didn’t know about them. “We didn’t have to amend the product,” he says. “We had to get people to view libraries in a different light, as an activated space for learning in every form, not just for reading and checking out books.”

His team designed neighborhood-specific websites for each of the 18 branches, and came up with “Start Here” as the campaign slogan. It was printed on large signs and placed at the front desk of all the branches. DCA produced a series of “Start Here” television ads with Memphis celebrities, portraying the public libraries as vibrant community centers. In his 30-second spot, the music producer Boo Mitchell described the library as “a one-stop shop to cultivate anything you want to do.”



In the Cloud901 art studio, teens can learn traditional art forms like sketching, painting and sculpting. The studio is staffed with artists who are active in the Memphis community.

In 2018, at Carpenter's suggestion, MPL launched a pop-up guerrilla marketing campaign. DCA had a copy built of a Redbox self-service movie rental kiosk—nationwide, there are 42,000 of these signature-red kiosks outside grocery stores, pharmacies and other retailers—with the logo changed to “Readbox.” It was filled with library books and information about library services, and placed in prominent locations around the city. “Readbox was wildly successful,” says Carpenter. “People loved it and we filmed their reactions and posted them. I actually got a call from Redbox, who were amused and intrigued, and gave us their full blessing.”

Keenon McCloy says, “Readbox was a great conversation starter and a way for us to be playful. The real power of libraries is they can transform people's lives. But libraries can also be fun.”

---

Sitting at a computer in the video lab at Cloud901, wearing a white button-up shirt with her hair pulled back in braids, is an 18-year-old poet, writer, performance artist and filmmaker named Janay Kelley. She has been coming here for several years.

When Kelley first arrived at the video lab, an instructor there, Amanda Willoughby, taught her how to use the equipment—cameras, lights, editing software—and soon became a friend. “Amanda is someone I can trust and confide in,” says Kelley. “One that allows me room to grow, that drives me crazy in an overbearing, supportive aunt kind of way, and pushes me to be vulnerable and open.”

The first film that Kelley made here was titled *The Death of Hip-Hop*. She lit and filmed herself, wearing a white sweater against a black background, as she delivered a spoken-word performance. It begins, “I used to live on this street called Nelly/Make a right on Kanye then head West/If you see a Tribe of ghetto communities Called Quest/You’ve gone too far.” She describes it as “a poem I had written that used multiple hip-hop metaphors as an allegory for the struggles of Black youth. I was going to upload it onto YouTube, but Amanda insisted on entering it into the [Indie Memphis Youth Film Fest](#).”

Kelley went to the awards ceremony to support her friends in the local NuJas production company. By the time the winning films were announced, she was tired after a long day in workshops and screenings, wishing they would hurry up so she could go home and sleep. “I had my head down, just resting my eyes, thinking about all the homework I had neglected,” she says. “Then they called my name. I had won the Grand Jury Prize. I was extremely confused. Then the tears came. I was wobbling onstage to claim my prize, to hear my cheers, and receive my roses.”

Her second film, *Kinfolk*, was a complete departure. In voice-over, we hear the true-life recollections of an elderly Black woman who grew up during Jim Crow—the woman is Bernice Lott, Kelley’s grandmother. At the same time we see a succession of contemporary black-and-white images and portraits, and then title cards with written quotes about the Memphis Massacre of 1866. In May of that year, angered by Reconstruction, mobs of white residents and police officers rampaged through Black neighborhoods for three days, committing robbery, rape and arson. Forty-six African Americans were killed, 75 were injured, and every Black church and school in the city was burned, along with 91 homes.

Asked about her motivations for making *Kinfolk*, Kelley replied, “Black people are not monoliths, or pawns, or archetypes in white history. We are people, made of flesh and bone, filled with emotions, packed with hubris, controlled by thoughts and desires. Our history, which is still present, is not being told. Our stories are being lost.”

As a child, Kelley was an avid reader and valued libraries as a place where books were free. Cloud901 only increased her appreciation. “The library has given me confidence and access to the resources I needed to make films,” she says. “In a place where you are traditionally supposed to be as quiet as possible, I have found my voice.”



Students reflect on being part of “Speak Your Truth,” a program led by Cossitt Library staff that encourages teens to discover the power of their own voice. Ariel Cobbert

Like *The Death of Hip-Hop*, *Kinfolk* was entirely shot and edited using equipment from Cloud901. And it too won the Grand Jury Prize at the Indie Memphis Youth Film Fest, in 2019, with a \$600 cash prize and \$5,000 film production budget. “At the announcement I was still surprised, but this time I didn’t cry,” says Kelley. “I screamed, ‘What?!’ all the way to the stage and back to my seat.”

---

Ramiro Salazar of San Antonio, Texas, is the former president of the [Public Library Association](#), which has 10,000 members in the United States and Canada. What’s happening in Memphis, he says, epitomizes how libraries are becoming community centers. “They’re a third place after job and home, where a child can do homework and people come together to attend programs, where literacy also means digital literacy and financial literacy,” he says. “Some libraries are doing a lot now with health and fitness, and culinary lessons and kitchens. Others give people access to expensive technologies, like 3-D printers, or seeds and gardens.”

The core mission of public libraries, he stresses, remains the same as ever: “We exist for the betterment of communities. We support literacy and learning. We want all our resources to be free and everyone to feel welcome.”

Salazar visited the Memphis libraries recently. “I was impressed by the attendance at their programs, the impact they’re having on communities, the sophisticated ways they raise revenue, the creative innovative thinking, and the visionary leadership,” he says. “Memphis has really raised the bar and I take my hat off to Keenon McCloy, who is not even a librarian.”

Shamichael Hallman, senior manager of the downtown Cossitt branch, the oldest library in Memphis, is not a librarian either. Tall, bearded, fashionable and dynamic, he was a youth minister at a local church when McCloy invited him to a job interview in 2016. They talked for hours about the new “civic commons”—a 21st-century town square—planned for the downtown riverfront.

With partial funding from a national nonprofit initiative, Reimagining the Civic Commons, the city was linking the Mississippi River promenade with a garden, park and relocated museum to form a new public space, with the Cossitt Library as its cornerstone. The goal was to bring together Memphians from different backgrounds. Hallman was hired to lead a \$6 million renovation of the Cossitt branch, which will partially open this month.



The historic Cossitt Library is undergoing a major renovation and is expected to reopen this winter. Ariel Cobbert



An area of the Cossitt slated for renovation. Plans include a café, community art installations and meeting spaces. Ariel Cobbert

Standing outside the steel-and-glass facade of the Cossitt—almost nothing remains of the original 1893 building—Hallman explains the challenge he faces. “We have a large, affluent community downtown, so we’re fighting for relevance,” he says. “We’ll have an outdoor yoga space with trees, and a café with artisanal food and drinks inside the library. We’ll have work stations, meeting rooms, sewing and knitting and embroidery equipment. We also have a lot of homeless people downtown, and we’ll be inviting them to dinners and other events with the more affluent folks.”

In recent years, there has been a migration of creative talent into the revitalizing downtown. “Filmmakers, artists, musicians, textile designers, podcasters,” says Hallman. “So we have an audio-video studio with \$30,000 of equipment and laptops loaded with e-commerce software. We want to be an incubator for entrepreneurs, so we’ve got a workshop and co-working spaces with printers and whiteboards. Upstairs there’s a 2,500-square-foot performance space, which can be used for acting classes, conferences, dance classes and performances.” The Cossitt branch will function as a place to eat, learn, exercise, run a business, make art and meet people, driven entirely by altruism.

A full list of the programs and initiatives underway in the Memphis Public Libraries system would fill this magazine. Most significant, perhaps, MPL is building teen centers modeled on Cloud901 at other branches, and there's a major push for libraries to go mobile. Vans emblazoned with the "Start Here" logo, and loaded with books and technology, are showing up at festivals, food truck sites, rodeos and other gathering places.

Sue Schnitzer, assistant director of community outreach and special projects (and chief instigator of the ukulele flash mobs), is leading this effort. "We have to get outside our buildings and bring our programming into the community," she says. "There are a lot of people in Memphis who can't afford cars, and public transportation is limited. So we're going to senior centers, schools, block parties. We bring robots [from our robot-building workshops] to keep the kids occupied, while we talk to the parents." Schnitzer has introduced pop-up story times, including bilingual ones, at laundromats and health clinics, to entertain children while their parents or guardians attend to business.

"If librarians can't save the world, no one can," says Christine Weinreich, executive director of the Memphis Library Foundation, which helps fund many of these initiatives. "They have no ego, they're not looking for glory, they just want to change lives and transform communities, and we have an army of them working in Memphis every day."

Once the Covid-19 pandemic hit, in spring 2020, the Memphis libraries closed their doors for six weeks—and moved most of the programming online. The MPL radio and television stations and website supplied the most accurate information available about the pandemic, and more than 60 librarians started delivering for Meals on Wheels. When the vaccines became available, Memphians could get their shots at the library.

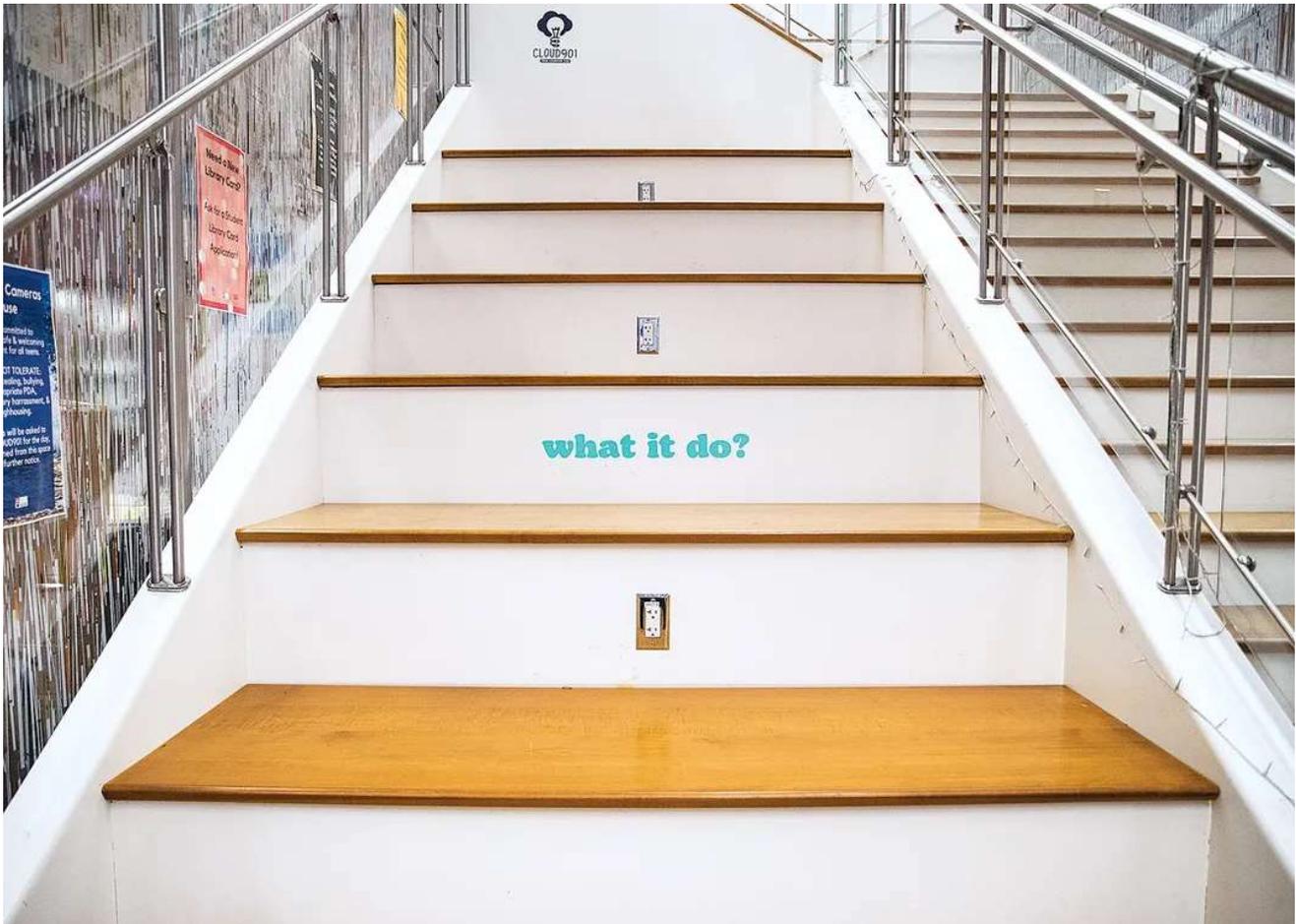
In early May of this year, McCloy's phone identified an incoming call as possible spam, but it was a Washington, D.C. area code, so she decided to answer it. A male voice asked to speak to her. "This is Crosby Kemper," said the voice, and her heart started racing.

Kemper is director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which gives out the National Medal—the highest honor that a library system can win. Kemper said that Memphis was one of three winners this year and it had been an easy decision for the judges.

Before McCloy announced the award, she had "National Medal Winner" T-shirts made for all the library staff. Then, with her deputy director Chris Marszalek, she toured all the branches with the medal itself and told the librarians they had earned it.

I called Crosby Kemper and asked him why Memphis had won the medal. "They have shown a lot of imagination in reaching the public, their entrepreneurial instincts are consistent and unusual, and they have a tremendous volunteer effort," he said. "In a city with a very high poverty rate, their libraries are oases of care, civility, activity and opportunity. And this year, in addition to keeping their normal services going, Memphis Public Libraries provided an extraordinary frontline response to the pandemic."

Ralph Calhoun is the audio engineer coordinator at Cloud901's recording studio. A muscular man in his 40s with dreadlocks and a big smile, he's also a singer-songwriter and guitar player who specializes in soulful love songs. He sits behind the mixing desk, working on a track called "Distorted Love Feeling" with up-and-coming rapper and singer Timothy Felix, or Telix. They experiment with synthesizer sounds and percussive fill-ins.



Called the “stairs to nowhere” by staff, these steps are a popular place to hang out and do homework—and serve as additional seating for Cloud901 programs. Ariel Cobbert

Calhoun and Felix grew up a generation apart in high-crime, low-opportunity neighborhoods in South Memphis. They both felt the same conflicting desires: to be loyal, supportive members of their communities, and to get out and live somewhere easier with better prospects.

Calhoun's musical talent won him a scholarship to the SAE (formerly known as the School of Audio Engineering) Institute in Nashville, and then a job at Blackbird Studio, also in Nashville. Founded by John McBride, husband of country music star Martina McBride, Blackbird is one of the world's premier recording studios—Bruce Springsteen is a client. Calhoun enjoyed working there as an engineer, but he was pining for Memphis when McCloy offered him a job at Cloud901. “I was ready to come home and make a difference,” he says.

Tim Felix lost his mother to breast cancer when he was 9. His father was “not in a position to do anything beneficial,” he says, so he moved in with his grandmother, a strict, church-going woman. She had a piano in her house, which he learned to play. “Then I branched out into singing,” he says. “My first audiences were at middle school and my grandmother’s church.”

She died in his senior year of high school. He moved in with a godmother in South Memphis, who was less strict. “It could have been my downfall,” Felix says. “There was a lot of crime in the neighborhood and it put a hustle in me, even though I knew I was a musician and that’s what I needed to do.” At age 16, while visiting a relative in Houston, he made a home studio recording of three rap tracks. Back in Memphis he continued writing, wishing he could record his new material and release it on the internet.

“I was doing research, looking for studios, and I found this thing called Cloud901, where supposedly it was all free,” he says. “It sounded way too good to be true, but I came in here one day, and then I met Ralph, and he really wanted to hear what I could do, and that’s how this whole journey began.” Now Felix had an expert producer and engineer for the first time—and a mentor, Calhoun.

Felix “can move the crowd,” says Calhoun. “He has that gift. My role is to record his music and teach him the business—the moves he needs to make, and all the ways he can get screwed over.”

Felix says, “It’s changed everything for me. Sometimes I have to stop myself and say, ‘Wait a minute, this is all happening at the *library*? And it’s all free?’”

Get the latest stories in your inbox every weekday.

Richard Grant | | [READ MORE](#)

Richard Grant is an author and journalist based in Tucson, Arizona. His most recent book is *The Deepest South of All: True Stories from Natchez, Mississippi.*

Ariel Cobbert | [READ MORE](#)

Photographer Ariel Cobbert is based in Memphis.

Recommended Videos

0 seconds of 4 minutes, 47 seconds Volume 0%



00:00

04:47



Filed Under: [American South](#), [Art](#), [Books](#), [Communities](#), [Innovation for Good](#), [Libraries](#), [teens](#)