

BC3's "eye-opening" Heaton Family Learning Commons plans first open house

Aug. 30, 2019



Community member Thomas Ekas, of Lyndora, seated, uses a computer while being assisted by Brooke M. Draper, library acquisition secretary at the Heaton Family Learning Commons on Butler County Community College's main campus in Butler Township, on Wednesday, Aug. 21, 2019. BC3 will hold its first open house for the 3-year-old Heaton Family Learning Commons on Sept. 18.

(Butler, PA) Longtime Butler County resident Thomas Ekas opened the glass doors to the Heaton Family Learning Commons on Butler County Community College's main campus in Butler Township for the first time July 31 – and his eyes opened wider.

“Awe,” Ekas said, “is the perfect word. Your eyes scan, and you can't believe the spaciousness of it.”

Within the 24,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art academic and community library, which plans its first open house Sept. 18, the 20-year Lyndora resident satisfies his curiosity about art, genealogy and psychology – “Whatever catches my eye at the time I am looking,” he said – among the learning commons' 40,000 volumes.

The 67-year-old retired insurance company material damage appraiser also researches the new car he might buy – a Mazda, a CX3, “white,” he added – by logging on to one of the 40 computers scattered throughout the upper and lower levels of the learning commons, whose architecture was lauded in the November 2017 issue of a national magazine.

The Heaton Family Learning Commons, featured in *Library Journal*, a New York City-based publication, is, Ekas said, “a real bonus to the community, and I am not even sure the community is aware of it.”

Funded in part by \$6 million in private gifts to the Pioneer Proud Campaign, the 3-year-old Heaton Family Learning Commons will showcase its offerings from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. Sept. 18.

The event is free and open to the community. Light refreshments will be served.

Designed by Renaissance 3 Architects, Pittsburgh, the Heaton Family Learning Commons replaced the John A. Beck Jr. Library, which opened in 1973 – seven years after BC3 held its first classes.

“I think of it as a palace”

Where opaque walls once stood are now glass pony-walls, awash in natural light from a 16-foot by 16-foot pyramid skylight centered atop an open staircase flanked by unexpected landings, each outfitted with turquoise or navy blue beanbag chairs and lime-green ottomans.

Tones of striated dark-blue-gray carpeting subtly dissolve into bursts of bright yellow or rust, and then back again, atop which sits chairs incorporating USB ports, 110-amp outlets and armrest trays suitable for laptops – and all near the Logan Café, with its high, pub-style tables aside floor-length windows.

“I think of it as a palace,” said Martin Miller, BC3’s dean of library services.

“That’s how I always describe it. The Heaton is probably the nicest library in western Pennsylvania that I know of, or that I have seen.”

“Eye-opening,” Ekas said.

The open house will also introduce community members to available materials and services, which in addition to 40,000 volumes and 40 computers, include 100 periodicals, 300 DVDs, printers, photocopiers, scanners, eight private study rooms, research assistance and a recording studio, all surrounded by wireless Internet connectivity and ample room.

“Community members can always find a place,” Miller said. “That’s important. We have seating if you need a work station, a bean bag, astronaut chairs, restaurant-style booths, work tables. The variety is great.”

Added Ekas, who received a free library card and free one-year parking pass Aug. 9: “There is no such thing as crowding in here. There is plenty of room to work and to maneuver, and the people are just fantastic.”

Community members can register for free library cards and free one-year parking passes, and take guided tours upon request at 7 p.m. following a 6 p.m. book reading by Linda K. Schmitmeyer and her husband, Steve.

Linda K. Schmitmeyer, a former Butler Eagle features editor and columnist, and former BC3 instructor, is the author of “Rambler: A family pushes through the fog of mental illness.”

“Rambler,” a 387-page nonfiction book published in 2018 by The Artists’ Orchard, “is an honest, intimate portrayal of a young family’s journey when the father has a mental illness,” said Schmitmeyer, of Middlesex Township. “It is told through familiar family scenes” and through her writing and that of her husband.

Community members can gather to hear Schmitmeyers read from “Rambler” on the upper level of the Heaton Family Learning Commons, and against a backdrop of floor-length windows that open to a vista of BC3’s oak-tree-lined campus, Miller said.

“I look out those windows often,” Miller said. “Everything is so natural. It is the natural beauty of it all.”

Or, as Ekas said, whatever catches his eye at the time he is looking.

RSVPs for the Heaton Family Learning Commons open house are suggested, but not required. Community members can RSVP at bc3.edu/heaton.