

Born into a banking family, R. Crosby Kemper III was chairman and CEO of UMB Financial Corp. and UMB Bank until 2004, when he chose to leave banking. Nobody could have predicted that he'd end up as the director of the Kansas City Public Library.

"Basically," Kemper says, "I've gone from past-due loans to overdue books."

Kemper's second cousin, Jonathan (the chairman of the Kansas City region's Commerce Bank), is the president of the library's board of directors, and says that his cousin was the best choice for the job. "He has a great love of activity. He loves books, and he loves ideas, and he's had experience as a director of a large corporation. He's also good at fund-raising," he says.

The funds raised enable the library to reach out to its patrons. According to Jonathan, "The library's mission is about connecting people," and his cousin is out to do just that. "We're running fast to keep up with the community's interests," Crosby says. "A library is one of the places that is accomplishing maybe one of our most important social goals, which is to bring people of all religious views, all races together—which we're doing."

With a chess club, teen movie afternoons, art exhibitions, lectures and performances, he has made the library just the kind of social setting he's aiming for. "Twenty years ago, in any urban library, the last group you would have seen were teenagers, especially teenaged males," Crosby says. "Today, we have lots of all of [them] in the library. It's where you go to achieve knowledge, and some of that knowledge is achieved through interactions in a community setting."

What's given him the greatest joy? "There's not just one thing. The two at the top of his list: "We've just renovated the children's library,



On the Books

Kansas City banker-turned-library director R. Crosby Kemper III knows a thing or two about keeping good records. By Seánan Forbes

and children are our most important patrons. The other is our level of programming. I think we're creating the best public library programming in America," Crosby says.

With approximately 2.5 million annual visitors to the area's libraries and more than 10 million to the Web site, one thing is clear: According to the people of Kansas City, R. Crosby Kemper III has finally found the right career.

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