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THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THEIR FUTURE

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Public libraries are, among other things, governmental agencies of democracies. The public library system enables people to exercise rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to access public and government information. Public libraries not only provide information, education and recreation to people but also act as public forums and centers for socialization. They play an important role in shaping children into future citizens who can make informed decisions. This article will discuss some of the most important functions of American public libraries.

The first amendment to the American constitution says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances" (U.S. Const. amend. 1).

Public libraries facilitate the constitutional mandate. Their essential function is: "to offer knowledge and information to the average citizen. In this way, public libraries provide tangible commitment to free speech, self-government, and self-education by collecting, organizing, preserving, disseminating, and protecting everyone's rights of access to the richness of human expression in all its recorded forms" (ALA 42). American public libraries grew out of this commitment. What would happen to the informational and recreational reading needs of the less-privileged if public libraries ceased to exist? Such an event would affect the economic, social and political development of the entire country. The importance of public libraries in providing information to both the rich and the poor cannot be ignored.

ADULT LITERACY SERVICES

To a large extent, the development of the nation depends on the literacy rate of its population. The United States ranks forty-ninth among the 156 United Nations member countries in literacy levels. Higher literacy means better education, better health, and better lives. "Whether the costs are in our health, safety, education or other quality-of-life issues, we may face a future where many Americans are unable to fully participate, contribute, and compete locally and globally because of functional illiteracy" (Hennen 43).

In the past, when immigrants landed in America, it was the public libraries that helped them learn English. In 1963, the American Library Association established a standing committee on Reading Improvement for Adults with the following mandate for public libraries: to stimulate librarians to realize their responsibilities and their role in an all-out effort to combat illiteracy; to survey existing library programs for undereducated adults; to furnish information in support of legislation and cooperative action to extend adult literacy; to survey existing materials which meet the interests and needs of the undereducated adult, reinforce his skills and establish habits of continuing reading; to document the great need for more and better instructional and supplementary reading materials for the adult just learning to read (Nauratil 87). The same holds true today. Many public libraries offer bilingual programs and ESL (English as a Second Language) tutoring programs to people coming primarily from Asia, Central and South America, the Middle East and Africa.

Public libraries carry out reading and literacy programs in partnership with schools and other associations such as the International

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Reading Association. These programs not only promote diversity, but also enable new immigrants to learn about American culture. At the Vigo County Public Library in Terre Haute, Indiana, everyone was surprised at the turnout for a get-together activity involving anyone connected to the library's literacy program. Also, the popular "One City, One Book" programs provide excellent vehicles to build community through dialogue and at the same time position the local library as the focal point of reading and literacy (McGrath 8). All this will only increase the number of users and the need for public libraries.

Public libraries also help with computer literacy. When William H. Gates Sr., the father of Bill Gates, addressed the Public Library Association's Tenth Annual Conference in 2004, he stated that "Today, more than fourteen million Americans—roughly 10 percent of all Internet users—now access the Internet through computers in public libraries" (PLA 183). Librarians train people from all walks of life to use computers for sending personal e-mails, job searching and getting medical information. Gates went on to tell the audience about a woman he had met in West Virginia: "she had been out of school for twenty-five years when she decided she needed a college degree. During her first day back at school at age forty-two, she realized she was the only person in class who didn't know how to use a computer. She went and learned at the local public library" (PLA 183). What would happen to such people if public libraries were not providing these important services?

YOUNG ADULT SERVICES

Public libraries have long played a major role in shaping the lives of teens. For children and teenagers, public libraries can provide guidance and influence their lives through programs such as job training, computer skills training, and résumé writing. Such services increase the number of young adults visiting public libraries. According to Kathy Ishizuka in her article "Preparing Teens for the Future," librarians are always looking for new ways to attract children and teens. Melanie Huggins, the director of youth services at the North Carolina's Public Library of Charlotte-Mecklenburg County (PLCMC), says, "We've learned that anything job-related attracts tons of kids" (Ishizuka 47). Ishizuka talks about other programs for young adults such as the PLCMC's 2002 Library Initiative for Youth Business (LIYB), an after-school career devel-

opment program aimed at attracting high school students (Ishizuka 47). Susan Harden, the director of the LIYB, says, "Teen usage of the library has risen dramatically—as high as 30 percent in branches where LIYB has offered programs" (Ishizuka 48).

Another interesting program carried out by some public libraries is e-journalism for teens, in which librarians teach the basics of journalism and research skills. One library associate of the Tucson-Pima Public Library system says, "There is no better way to learn because they're doing something for themselves. They learn about confidence, as well as social and writing skills" (Ishizuka 49). He also says that the teens "mostly use the Internet and databases like EBSCO, and they'll also grab the encyclopedia and dictionary" (Ishizuka 49). Impressed by the success of this program, the librarians launched similar programs at the Santa Rosa Learning Center Library (Ishizuka 49). Megan Kinney, national youth access coordinator for Libraries for the Future says, "It's important for libraries to see themselves as playing a definite role in youth development" (Ishizuka 49). Bookstores and Internet resources might provide innumerable information sources, but they cannot provide personal guidance.

It is the friendly and comfortable rapport librarians form with their clients that enthusiastically bring those clients back to the library. LIYB director Harden says, "Building relationships is what these programs are all about" (Ishizuka 48). Lambert Shell, who works as the youth counselor at the Queens Borough Public Library—Laurelton Branch says, "Kids need someone to communicate with. When a kid enters the library, the first thing I do is ask, 'How was your day? What's going on?'" (Ishizuka 48). This kind of personal communication is absent in bookstores and with solo computer use. These programs also encourage diversity by allowing children and teens to mingle with people from different ethnicities and backgrounds.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Public libraries provide the resources to help children grow into responsible and informed citizens, and have traditionally been a haven for children's activities. Creating good reading habits among young children is obviously important, but not all parents can do this easily at home. The public library offers these parents access to countless children's books and

activities, all for free. Children of immigrants can find help with learning English at their level as well. "Public libraries of course cannot do this alone. To make an impact, public libraries must continue to make working with schools and neighborhood agencies an ongoing priority. One vital partner is Head Start. As this federal program enters into its fortieth year, its philosophical shift and focus will be on literacy. Working partnerships with Head Start programs such as the one in the Tacoma (Wash.) Public Library that targets Hispanic families through bilingual programs have shown a dramatic increase in library use by kids and families." (Herrera 9).

SERVICES FOR SENIORS

Providing services to senior citizens has been a longtime policy in most public libraries. People living in nursing homes and senior centers often do not have much to do, so public libraries can make their lives better by providing them with special services. Libraries provide information dealing with health, fitness, mental alertness, retirement planning, income tax preparation, exercise and diet, and information dealing with referrals to government, local helping agencies and programs. "High rates of attendance have long given testimony to older adults' appreciation of library programs tailored to their interests" (Nauratil 69). Programs may include book talks and discussions, screening of movies, musical performances and other creative programs. An interesting point is that children like to be with the elderly, so sometimes librarians combine programs involving the elderly and children. "At the Missouri Public Library, Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) members present puppet shows in the children's department" (Nauratil 65). Libraries also take their programs into hospitals and senior citizen centers, and provide bookmobile services to elderly people who are unable to visit the library itself.

PRESERVING HISTORY

Public libraries preserve the history of a locality and transfer that history to future generations. Many local libraries have special collections related to the area's past, with items ranging from cookbooks; diaries of authors, historians, and artists; artifacts; and other valuable personal collections donated by members of the community. Many public libraries even have a separate local history department. For example, the history department of a public library in South Carolina or Virginia might

contain local information about the American Revolution, American independence, slavery, the Civil War, and so on.

Some libraries organize efforts to record the memories of longtime local residents. The article "Reconnecting the Past through Oral History" examines a project sponsored by the Way Public Library in Perrysburg, Ohio. For this project, called the Front Porch Oral History Series, the librarians conduct interviews with the local people and take photographs of the interviewees. Interview excerpts are made into articles for the local newspaper. "The impact of the written articles in the weekly town newspaper has enabled the project to practically market itself," says one librarian involved with the project (Baranowski 111). As a result of the library's efforts, other organizations such as churches and teams are coming forward to get their own histories documented.

MEETING ROOMS AND PLACES FOR EXHIBITS AND DISPLAYS

Public libraries often sponsor programs and allow displays and exhibits in the library. They also provide space for public forums. If religious or political groups want to hold meetings and discussions, they can use areas designated for those purposes. Article Six of the Library Bill of Rights states that such facilities "should be made available to the public served by the given library on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use" (ALA 173). This again is a guarantee of the freedom of expression and the right to assemble peacefully.

Also, people from different ethnicities can display exhibits about their culture, and local authors can display their books. Deborah Mesplay, Director of the Daviess County Public Library in Owensboro, Kentucky says that her library works hard to promote community events via library displays. "We now have numerous organizations contacting us and asking if we will put up a display on a particular subject or issue that relates to an organizational activity," she says (Hennen 43). Such programs make people come together and are a good opportunity for socializing. The surge in the use of the Internet can cause adults and children to lead more isolated lives. Their diminished socializing skills can sometimes lead to stress and depression. This again emphasizes the need for our public libraries.

VOLUNTEER AND REFERRAL SERVICES

Although American society is considered affluent, a sizable percentage of the population is still poor. Many families cannot afford services like tax preparation. Public libraries fill this gap by providing volunteer help with filing tax returns. Some libraries have volunteers counseling children and teens on managing stress and anxiety. Some social workers associated with public libraries make home visits to assist kids who have problems. Apart from providing information and reference services, public libraries also offer referral services. "Findings suggest that information and referral services tend to attract users from the middle and upper socio-economic levels, like other library services" (Childers 216). Libraries help clients locate specific agencies or services, and also help with follow-up inquiries.

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THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The role of the public library is essential, as shown by the functions discussed above. Public libraries will and should always exist. For American democracy to survive, we need our public libraries. In the words of Jo Ann Pinder, 2002-2003 PLA president, "Our forefathers could not have envisioned the country we have today. But they gave us a framework that continues to function with what we have become. That framework needs an informed, educated electorate, which they addressed peripherally. Those thoughts and writings have evolved into today's public library. I'm as optimistic about the future of public libraries as I am about the future of the Constitution" (Auld 63).

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