



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
July 8, 2005

“Knowledge is of two kinds. We know where we can find information ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.”

-Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784

When I was a student at University of California, Berkeley, I took an introductory music class. I really enjoyed it, and during that time I discovered the Tower Classics music store on Telegraph. What a place! The expertise of the staff was astounding- every time I looked for a particular record set, like “The Messiah,” I would call or go there and have a long and comforting conversation with someone about conductors, interpretations and recordings. It was like going to a wine store, where the vocabulary has evolved into a separate language, so the depth of knowledge and experience can be reflected by the words used.

I haven’t thought about that store in a long time, but this week it came to mind when I was thinking about thoroughness and time. I was washing my car and as I was rubbing my chamois over the wet surface and trying not to leave streaks, I was reminded of waxing my

parents’ car when I was a child. I remember spreading that pink liquid over the whole car, then carefully wiping away every trace - and usually struggling with the last few inches where that pink film would refuse to be wiped off. I can’t even remember the last time I took so much care and had so much time to do anything. Maybe that is part of childhood - having time to do things well and long - but I don’t think so. I think we have invented quick and easy ways of meeting our needs and we are passing on this hurried approach to our children.

The kind of expertise I found in Tower Classics is difficult to maintain and even more difficult to justify. And what is saddest about that is the long-term effect of superficial knowledge and fast answers on those who are growing up today. Because these are our future voters, readers and politicians, and without the experience of someone who is

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allowed – even encouraged – to take the time to know a subject well, they won’t know it’s value. I remember the Business Library that used to be part of the Alameda County library system. I once took a tour of it and I was greatly impressed by the combination of in-depth knowledge and enthusiasm displayed by the staff there. That library has now been incorporated into the Fremont main library, and so the opportunity to go to a building of experts is gone.

Working in a public library should give me the chance to be this informed and leisurely person, because - most of all - a librarian should be an expert who listens, who asks and who gives thought to each library user’s question. Every librarian should have the time to draw on the knowledge and the expertise required for the job. But as budgets are reexamined and funds are

reallocated, we can’t be the public servants we want to be – no matter our intentions. On the days when my library has minimal staff, and I look around and see all of us – clerks, pages, librarians – working cheerfully and thoroughly to give each person the best service, I am struck by the irony of being in a public service job that is highly valued by the individuals who use our library, but undervalued by some of those who make the financial decisions.

Access is a critical part of the fight librarians wage as we continue to defend the rights of our library users to gather information in private. With less staff, fewer materials and shorter hours, all the privacy in the world isn’t going to help.