



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.”

-From the American –
Library Association Bill
of Rights, adopted June
18, 1948

I am taking a class this summer on collection development for libraries. Particularly of interest to me are the policy discussions we’ve been having, since the class includes students interested in all kinds of libraries: public, research, academic, special and school.

Collection development policies cover how and why a library chooses the materials they do. For a public school library, this is controlled greatly by the curriculum and, in fact, some school librarians have little say over much of the content of their library.

And interesting situations can arise in a school library, especially over censorship of a book. The school district can have a say (although this has been controversial, to say the least) on whether or not a particular book will be available for the students and there can be pressure from parents in the district. Sometimes, the book remains in the library, but it is

not readily available – a student must request it and look at it at the library.

Because equal access and a broad representation of views are the goals for a public library, censorship is against everything librarians believe in. But there are, of course, always discussions over this. And it is sometimes difficult to know when a library is using censorship and when it is simply limited by funds and space.

There are numerous examples of materials that force libraries and their communities to examine the selection policy and the First Amendment, which 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...” Books like Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* or films like *Jesus Christ, Superstar* have frequently received community complaints. And for most librarians, having items in

their collections that provoke complaints from some users and compliments from others means they are doing their job well.

But the topic that has sparked the most heated discussions in my class has been how a public library should meet the needs of its community. Part of any library’s collection development policy manual should be a section on finding out what the local community wants and needs. How this is interpreted and used for selection is another matter.

Should a public library, using the taxpayers’ money, buy materials they have so far expressed no desire for? If they only want popular reading material and DVDs, should these be the bulk of the collection? What exactly is the role of the community library: to teach, to guide, to meet the expressed needs or to guess the

unexpressed ones?

This discussion has been going on as long as there have been libraries. Balancing the public’s requests with materials that librarians feel will make their collections well rounded and able to meet future needs is an enormous and sometimes contentious task. In my small class there are people who passionately feel the library’s place is to find out what the community wants and give it to them – that is the job of the public library. Then there are those who think a library should present other views, whether or not the library users share them.

There is something comforting about the fact that librarians and future librarians are still so emphatically joining this age-old and never-to-be-resolved debate, because we may not agree, but we definitely care.