



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

-James Madison, 1751-1836

My youngest daughter and my stepdaughter are at colleges this year; one at Hiram College in Ohio, the other at the University of Vermont. I’ve noticed that when I call them on their cell phones, I frequently catch them studying at their school libraries.

This started me thinking about college libraries, and since I was at a family event this past week, I decided to ask my relatives about their library experiences in college. Did they use the library? I asked them. And what did they use it for?

The first two answers I got were interesting because they were so similar. The first one said he used his library to listen to music. There was a small soundproof private room, he told me, where there was a record player and shelves of classical records. He spent hours there, playing his favorites and listening to assigned pieces.

When I asked my father, I got almost the identical

answer; but instead of music, he was listening to poetry records. His description was so similar – a small soundproof room, full of records and a record player – I thought for a second I had already asked him. My father also told me he now owns similar records, prompted by his exposure to that room more than 60 years ago.

My own memories of college libraries include the undergraduate and graduate libraries at the University of California, Berkeley. At the then new Moffitt Library, I would start by making a deal with myself. If I studied for an hour, I could take a 10-minute break and walk up and down the aisles, looking at the books. I guess there is nothing so enticing as what you can’t have and being near all those shelves of books was such a temptation for me. I can clearly remember wanting nothing more than the time to read anything I wanted, rather than my homework. Then, as now, the luxury of

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time and a good book were to be treasured.

My college professor sister commented on the current undergraduate library behaviors. In her experience, library books are being used more than ever, because students can search the library catalog from their own dorm room computers, place holds and then pick up the materials at the library. This kind of remote accessibility has made library books, even those in storage, more available to the students. In fact, her college library promises an impressive turnaround time of two hours for most of the stored books.

She also mentioned the way the college and university libraries are being designed these days, with wireless access and large meeting areas, where students can get together to work on group projects.

And of course, there are the electronic databases, which

can be used both in the library and remotely. Learning to use these can be a challenge, just as it is for public library patrons. Consequently, college librarians have to be able to instruct and be available in ways I don't remember from my undergraduate days.

My best memory of college libraries, though, is the view from the bathroom window of the Doe library. As I stood high up and warmed by the old painted radiator, I could look out and see a bigger world; and for a few minutes, I was not a pressured student, rushing from class to class, but a simple sightseer. Now that's a good library memory.