



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Intellectual freedom must include the freedom to believe in a lie.”

-Kathleen Nietzsche Wolkoff, “Library Trends,” 1996

I recently read an article called “The Problem of Holocaust Denial Literature in Libraries,” by Kathleen Nietzsche Wolkoff. This beautifully written and thought-provoking piece gives a fair look at the issue of which books should be included in a library collection.

Her main emphasis is on materials that the librarian knows to be untrue. Should they be in the collection at all? If they are, should they be labeled? Or should they be shelved in a section other than the usual one for that type of material? One example she gives is cataloging Holocaust denial literature as “errors, inventions” or “anti-Semitism,” rather than history.

I love these kinds of questions – there is something fascinating about the different views on subjects like this. Part of it, I think, is that these are important decisions. They affect what is available to the general public when they come to their public library. They affect how

librarians choose to interpret their responsibility to their public to provide a wide range of subjects – while also adhering to principles of truth.

Ms. Wolkoff makes a good point about the concept of truth, though. She asserts that many of the things we believe to be true are not necessarily ones we have experienced directly. Sound waves, for example: this concept makes sense to me, even though I have never seen one. Or how about the truths that change, like the Tooth Fairy? And then, of course, there are organizations devoted to concepts outside of traditional thinking, like the society that believes that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, is the “true” Shakespeare.

So, how can we expect librarians to be the arbiters of truth? It seems like a great burden to place on a group of people no wiser than anyone else. But should a library collection hold something so rep-

rehensible as Holocaust denial literature? Should a public library hold itself to a moral standard that is greater than the need to provide an array of opinions? Does the First Amendment supersede a library’s obligation to belief in fairness, justice and truth? Or should a library stand for something – human rights, education, fairness?

Ms. Wolkoff quotes Noel Peattie, who co-authored the book *The Freedom to Lie, a Debate About Democracy*. Peattie says: “Truth cannot simply endure the presence of a lie. It has to fight and overcome it. The lie behind slavery led to the Civil War; the lie behind segregation led to the civil rights movement. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was moved to oppose the lie of racism with his truth.”

I have to admit I am drawn to the idea of there being a moral right. I like to think I

have principles and that by adhering to them, in all parts of my life, I can know I am doing my best.

And so I agree with Mr. Peattie. Keeping quiet about something we feel is wrong is like participating in that wrong. But the problem for libraries is that someone has to decide what is wrong and what is right. And once we start doing that, we become vulnerable to public opinion, personal opinion and the opinions of those who control the funds.

Because no matter where you draw a line, there is always someone waiting to draw a different one. It is better, I think, to make a library a place where you can find all ideas – and therefore make it possible for readers to make their decisions based on the truths they find for themselves.