



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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**“Shortsighted:
1. unable to see far;
near-sighted; myopic.
2. lacking in foresight:
‘a short-sighted plan’.”**

-From *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*

Library closures have been in the news lately. The Richmond Public Library has closed two branches and cut back the hours at its main library. Berkeley Public Library hasn’t closed its branches, but has reduced the open hours at all their locations. And, according to a December 16 article on the *Monterey Herald* website, the Salinas Library currently plans to close all three of its branches in March 2005.

I also discovered recently that the jails library service I was involved in for eight years – a service that proudly provided direct library service to every inmate in the Alameda County jail system – has discontinued direct book service. Gone are the one-on-one interactions between librarians and inmates. Gone is the opportunity for the deputies to see another side of the people they are guarding. Gone are the impressions we carried away with us – of people who are dehumanized by numbers and identical outfits, yet continuing

to read and discuss a range of paperback books, from Tolstoy to Harold Robbins to Machiavelli.

There are many intangible ways a library has an impact on a community, but when it gets down to voting or making decisions on how meager funds will be spent, it is much easier to consider the tangible. It is not unlike the intangible effects of sending a young soldier to a war in a faraway country. In both cases, the personal and long-lasting effects are not weighted as heavily as the immediate ones.

In the short term, closing a library or reducing its hours means the money saved can be allocated for other services. And in the short term, people want to know there are police officers patrolling their streets or ambulances standing by for their emergencies. How can a book or a computer at a public library compare with the immediacy of public safety?

But is that all a library is?

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The excitement in a community when a new library opens belies the idea that it is simply a building full of library materials and computers. The daily, minute-by-minute interactions among staff and library users can leave impressions in ways that will never be appreciated.

I recently read a quote from *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin De Becker that really summed this up for me: “No ceremony is attached to the moment that a child sees his own worth reflected in the eyes of an encouraging adult. Though nothing apparent marks the occasion, inside that child a new view might take hold. He is not just a person deserving of neglect or violence, nor just a person who is a burden to the sad adults in his life... No, this child might be someone else, someone whose appearance before this one adult revealed specialness or loveability or value.”

Of course, it isn't only

children who can benefit from this kind of attention and support. As I interact with the children and adults who come to the library, I am always aware of the institution that I represent. And as the representative, I support not only free and equal access – but also an interest in their interest, no matter what it is.

But to provide this service, our libraries need to be open. It is ironic that the local bookstores – where each item must be purchased – are open not only every day of the week, but as many as twelve hours a day. And the library, with its depth, breadth and free access, is open relatively few.