



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Many libraries reported that only a few librarians rove and that others found it too intimidating, felt like they were violating users’ privacy, found it too tiring, preferred to try to do other work at the desk, or simply did not like to rove.”

-From “Roving Reference: A New Approach to User Services” by Martin Courtois and Maira Liriano

One of the aspects of being a librarian that I particularly like is our public service role. I like to be asked questions and I like to help and those are two of the main components of my job. And, regardless of all the issues we come across in our work - computers versus books, censorship, fines, budgets - I think many of us go into this profession for one simple reason: we are helpful people. There is a satisfaction that comes from answering a question, no matter the question. Even the straightforward directional questions, like How do I get a library card? and, How many DVDs can I check out? give me a sort of simple pleasure.

This may be because asking for help doesn’t come naturally to me. Unlike the stereotypes of the woman who asks for directions and the man who doesn’t, I am the one who will drive a hundred miles in the wrong direction before stopping at a gas station to get help.

I am resistant to being told how to do something, where to find something or even what something means. So, I want to take good care of the person who stops at my desk and asks, particularly if that someone is a child.

More and more, I am also answering questions by approaching a library user and asking if I can help. I am amazed by how often the answer is yes, and I can’t help wondering what would have happened if I hadn’t come along. Would they have eventually gone to the children’s or adult reference desk? Would they have figured out the answer? Or would they have left without the book or movie or information they were seeking?

The idea of wandering - or roving, as it is called in the library literature - has been an ongoing topic of discussion among librarians. A number of libraries have staff that only rove, while others encourage or

require reference desk staff to get out from behind the desk to approach their patrons. And the response to this idea has been as varied as the librarians themselves: some embrace it and some don't.

As with just about any technique, there are advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that people like me may get some much needed help. Another is that as the librarian wanders, she can get a feeling for who is at the library and what they are doing. She is a bigger presence when she is away from the desk and I think this is good.

Perhaps the biggest disadvantage is that if a library doesn't have enough staff to have both a rover and a reference person, an empty reference desk can appear to mean there is no help available. A friendly and competent person behind a desk makes a library seem like a safe and dependable place to

go. So, in the ideal situation, there would be a person at the reference desk and another person out-and-about.

Perhaps the best approach to roving is to add it to the innumerable methods librarians can use to make sure their library visitors feel welcome. There is no right answer for how to do this, since each community, library and librarian is unique. It is the meshing of these three that makes library work so challenging and so rewarding.