



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Many doctors’ offices and day care centers feature prominently placed TV sets. Using TV-Turnoff Network materials demonstrating the links between television and obesity, violence, and educational underachievement, encourage your doctor and day care centers to go TV-free.”

-From the TV-Turnoff Network

I recently picked up a “TV Turn Off Week” flyer at the Hilltop YMCA. This annual event is sponsored by the TV-Turnoff Network (www.tvturnoff.org) and supported by many national agencies, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, Girl Scouts USA and the YMCA. The Hilltop YMCA was participating in this campaign by providing events and a flyer called “101 Screen-Free Activities.”

This bright yellow sheet included great suggestions like: “Visit and get to know your neighbors; start a fiction or public policy book group; join a choir; write an article or story; and, do a crossword puzzle.” It was a thorough list and all of the ideas seemed like good alternatives to watching television.

I am glad to report there are also public libraries all across the country that celebrate this event - despite a decision made by the American Library

Association (ALA) Council at their 1999 Midwinter meeting. At that time, they voted to rescind their support for “National TV Turnoff Week,” asserting: “ALA should invest its energies into promoting intelligent choices in selecting and using information in all formats and of all types” (from ALA Council report).

This decision wasn’t without controversy. I found a succinct and well-written letter from librarian and media specialist Carol M. Ansel on the School Library Journal website (SLJ.com). Ms. Ansel received an award from the Connecticut Educational Media Association for a program that expanded on the National TV Turnoff Week. Her letter was a response to those who saw an event like this as a way for librarians to “police TV.” As Ms. Ansel says: “In promoting TV Turnoff Week, I do not see myself, in any way, as ‘policing TV.’ TV Turnoff Week encourages parents and students to make

the choice to turn off their own televisions for a limited time, in order to reacquaint themselves with other leisure activity choices. One of the most obvious of these choices is to visit a library and read a book...I think the organization is missing a fine opportunity to promote reading and libraries, effectively cutting off its nose to spite its face.”

In addition, I found a letter written to the ALA Council List, by a public school librarian, Elaine Harger. Her response to the vote by the council was heartfelt: “As a public school librarian, I felt betrayed by ALA Council when it voted to abandon support of Turn-Off-TV Week. This is an event that gives those of us who work with children and parents the opportunity to explore and discuss and take action in regard to the huge role television plays in the lives of many.”

As I was researching this annual event, I also came across a device called TV-B-Gone. This universal one-button remote, invented by Mitch Altman, can turn off almost any television. It would have come in handy the other day when a friend and I were the only ones in a doctor’s waiting room and the television set was on. Instead of having to ask my tall friend to turn it off, I could have whipped out my TV-B-Gone and done it myself.

Although the result would have been the same: The incensed receptionist immediately came out and turned it back on, telling us sternly: “Other people may want to watch it.” I offered to turn it back on again when those other patients showed up, but to no avail – although she did agree to have it muted until then.