



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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***“Words have power,  
breath is sacred; act  
accordingly and serve  
the people.”***

-John Berry, librarian and  
poet, from California  
Native Artists Network  
website  
([www.neshkinukat.org  
/profiles](http://www.neshkinukat.org/profiles))

To many children and some adults, everyone who works in a library is a librarian. There is something comforting about this- I think it is a way of emphasizing what we all, as library staff, have in common. We all work with books and other library materials, and we are all involved, in some way, in making sure these materials get to the people who want them.

However, we do have different job titles and varying responsibilities. Here is a brief look at those people you see when you go to a library. Of course, not all libraries are the same. Even the job titles can vary - but there are many factors in common.

The Alameda County Library system has two classifications: The clerical staff and the reference staff. The clerical staff includes a supervising clerk, clerks and pages. Clerks are the people you see when you check out a book. They also do a lot of

things you don't see, like process requested material, make those telephone calls when you return a DVD and the case is empty, and register people for library cards.

Pages are the people you don't see much, unless you are browsing and you come across someone shelving: that's a page. They also arrange furniture, help with donations, and find requested items on the shelves. Many librarians and clerks of all kinds started as pages - it is a good way to see what it is like to work in a public library and - at least in our library system - no college degree is required. In fact, all clerical positions require only a high school diploma.

I started as a clerk at the Albany Library, although I was only there a few months before I became a Librarian Assistant, working in the jails program. I did that for many years, and then moved to a Librarian position. This is possible in Alameda County, through job

experience and by having a college degree. Only administrators and managers are required to have a library science degree (MLS), but in general this is unusual in libraries. Most public libraries require an MLS for librarians.

So, what is the difference between a Librarian and a Librarian Assistant? In a civil service hiring situation, like Alameda County, the difference is sometimes more about the job classification than the job itself. Librarian Assistants can look and act just like librarians – in fact, there are probably people you interact with at a library who are not really called librarians, but they answer your questions, do storytimes, order books and sometimes know more about a particular collection than a librarian in the same branch.

And of course this brings up the question of whether or not an MLS is essential for

doing a good job as a librarian. I would say the answer is no, it's not – I've known too many librarians without degrees to think that a degree makes a librarian. But I can understand the requirement. As professionals, it can be difficult to be taken seriously when it looks like a volunteer could take over some of our duties.

In addition, requiring a professional degree helps the public and the local politicians understand there is more to our job than answering simple questions. Much thought and study has gone into the science of librarianship and the degree is not bestowed casually. And as free access to information in our society becomes threatened, librarians need all the clout they can muster.