



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“...As libraries’ relevance comes into question, they face an existential crisis at a time they are perhaps needed the most. Despite their perceived obsolescence in the digital age both libraries – and librarians – are irreplaceable for many reasons.”

-Will Sherman, “Are Librarians Totally Obsolete?” January 30, 2007 (degreetutor.com)

I was recently sent a link to something called the “Library Use Value Calculator” (www.maine.gov/msl/services/calculator.htm). Adapted by the Maine State Library and originally from the Massachusetts Library Association, this calculator gives library users an idea of how much they would pay out-of-pocket for their library services. A simple chart lists 8 categories and asks for the number of times per month these services are used by a person or family.

The categories are: books borrowed, movies borrowed, museum passes borrowed, interlibrary loan, auditorium use per hour, children’s programs attended, Maine newspapers viewed online and reference questions asked. It is interesting to see the numbers they have attached to these services. For instance, books are valued at \$15 each, children’s programs are valued at \$6, reference questions at \$7, videos and DVDs at \$4, and auditorium use per hour is \$250.

The point of this, in case

you hadn’t guessed, is to show communities the worth of their local library. Demonstrating this value is an ongoing task for libraries and librarians, because even though libraries continue to be busy and very much appreciated by the people who use them, there seems to be a return again and again to the idea that libraries have outlived their usefulness or become obsolete. Why this happens, I don’t know. What I do know is that without libraries, our society would become even more lopsided, with a large group of people unable to access resources, such as computers, the Internet, literacy programs, job resources, CDs, videos, DVDs, children’s programs and books of every kind.

One man who has written about this topic is Stephen Abram, mentioned in last week’s column. His March 30 piece on the SirsiDynix website (www.sirsidynix.com) is called “The Value of Libraries: Impact, Normative Data, & Influencing Funders.” What I particularly appreciate about Abram – be-

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sides his enthusiastic and approachable style – is his collection of pertinent studies and statistics. In this article, he quotes from a January 2005 study conducted in South Carolina. According to their findings, 92% of library users said their library improves the overall quality of their life and 47% said it increases local property values. 49% of business users “indicated that they obtained most of the business/research information from their public library” and 78% indicated that information from the library “contributed to the success of their business.”

Other statistics include the annual value of reference services (about \$26 million) and the “total and indirect return on investment for every \$1 expended on the state’s public libraries by SC State and local governments is \$4.48, a return of almost 350%!” Besides the money spent on public libraries, another issue is the idea that

with the increasing use of technology, libraries and librarians will be unneeded. Those of us who work in public libraries know this isn’t true. Every hour I work I help someone with an issue relating to technology. I answer questions about searching the Internet, downloading files, finding newspaper articles online, job-hunting, using email and much more. As Will Sherman says: “Technology provides better access to information, but it is a more complex tool, often requiring specialized know-how. This is a librarian’s specialty, as they dedicate themselves to learning the most advanced techniques to help visitors access information effectively.”

Libraries are here to stay, because we all need them. Nothing can replace the personal attention of an informed librarian, in an atmosphere that supports the freedom to choose what and how information is gathered.