



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Whatever its origin, there can be no doubt that ‘Happy Holidays’ is said in the spirit of generosity and good will. It is almost impossible to imagine anyone wishing his or her neighbor ‘Happy Holidays’ with a hostile intent.”

-From “In Their Own Words” on *People for the American Way* website (www.pfaw.org)

It is that time of year again, when we gather with family and friends, think about our past and find ourselves inundated with Christmas decorations and Christmas music. I grew up celebrating Christmas and for me it is a time to enjoy traditions, and exchange presents and good will. However, it is not a religious holiday for me – it is a holiday that symbolizes family more than Christianity. And since half of my family is Jewish, it is also the time of year when I think about those of us who celebrate Chanukah instead – or, for some of my family – in addition to Christmas.

When I started working in libraries I hadn’t given this topic much consideration. Perhaps if you had asked me then what I thought of public displays centered around Christmas, I might have thought “Why not?” After all, it was the holiday celebrated by most of the people I knew. But I have changed. Now when I see those decorations everywhere: banks, schools, stores, hospitals, even

some public libraries, I am uncomfortable.

It is not easy to change and so it has taken me many years to examine my beliefs. But there is something about using public money to serve a diverse community that can inspire new thoughts and new conclusions. As a public librarian, I have had to learn to make no assumptions; I remind myself daily that my opinions are not necessarily those of the public I serve. I’m glad this is true, because I think it is healthy and even exciting to be constantly confronted with differing views. It not only makes us more open-minded, it also helps us understand our own values and beliefs. It encourages us to let go of preconceptions and rigid ideas and expand our definitions of comfortable words, like holidays and celebrations. It is wonderful to know a community can celebrate different holidays, but share the same good feelings about the power of generosity, kindness and appreciation for

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each other.

However, there are many who don't feel this way. Last week *The New York Times* had what I guess was an advertisement on the Op-Ed page. This quarter-page piece - “Celebrate Diversity: Celebrate Christmas” - from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights castigated those of us who have decided to use inclusive language this time of year. We say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Happy Chanukah” or “Merry Christmas” or even “Happy Winter Solstice” because that way we can include every person we address. When I did an Internet search on this topic, I discovered there was much more to this issue than one piece. There have apparently been boycotts of stores and much exchange of strong opinions. I was surprised to hear this, because while I am thinking I am making progress in becoming a better librarian, others are viewing this as an attack

on their religion.

This is sad, because if there is anything I believe about religions, it is that rather than competing, they should be working together to help all of us get along, peacefully and perhaps even lovingly. As it says on the holiday postcard I recently got from my acupuncturist, “I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion. The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater is our own sense of well-being” (Dalai Lama, as quoted on Nancy Rakela's holiday card 2006).