



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life.”

-Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)

In the last couple of weeks, I have been reminded again about the importance of public libraries in providing access to modern technology - in particular, computers and the Internet. Every day before we open there is a group of people waiting in the lobby. When the doors are unlocked, most of those people will quietly go directly to the computers. They are comfortable using the Internet to check their email, search for information or services, search our online catalog for books and other materials, apply for jobs or colleges or even study for exams.

But not everyone is at ease with computers. I recently spoke to a man at the reference desk who was trying to apply for a specific kind of employment. He discovered during his search that all the jobs he was interested in required an online application and an email account. He had never used a computer, since his kind of work doesn't require it, and he was bemused and frustrated.

“I'm not stupid,” he told me, “and I learn quickly. But I don't know anything about computers.”

As a busy librarian, it can be daunting to be asked a question like this. Basically, he wanted to learn how to use a mouse, how to set up an email account and how to fill out a form online. The whole concept of email can sound strange when trying to explain it to someone who has never used it and I found myself floundering, even as I said the right words. It reminded me of trying to teach my children how to tell time. By the time I got from 24 hours in the day to 60 minutes in an hour to 60 seconds in a minute, it seemed absurd - like an urban legend.

Telling this man he didn't have to own a computer to have email and that his email is accessible from any computer started to feel that way, as he justifiably looked confused and anxious. I know it isn't that different from accepting televisions receive invisible signals or

continued on page 2

huge heavy airplanes stay in the air; however, for this man, it was possibly the difference between getting a job and not getting one.

Fortunately, his timing was great, because the very next day was one of our drop-in Internet Basics classes. Our Teen Librarian, Vivian Jaquette, employs a laptop and a projector to explain the fundamentals of using a computer and accessing the Internet. Many of this man’s questions would be answered and then he could use our library computers to create a free email account. The next day he attended the class and was on his way to computer literacy.

Many public libraries provide classes like this that offer a good introduction for beginners. There are other kinds of services provided by libraries, too. For several years when I was the Teen Librarian at the Albany Library, I ran a Teen-Senior Internet tutoring

program. This program paired seniors with technology-savvy teen volunteers, who provided one-on-one tutoring on using computers and the Internet. To make sure the pairings were good ones, both tutor and tutee filled out an application, indicating interests, computer proficiency and even language spoken. It was rewarding to run and I was glad when the Fremont branch of my library system borrowed the idea. Theirs is still being offered and, like mine, it is quite popular.

As technology continues to change the way people go about their lives, it is programs like this, as well as free Internet access and patient, knowledgeable librarians, that can make all the difference for library users.