



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“To honor the cooperative spirit, where you deny yourselves things for the betterment of the whole – that is the concept that we’re in danger of losing.”

-Janny Scott, “Where ‘Buy Low and Sell High’ are Fighting Words,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2006

A recent piece in *The New York Times* about a co-op apartment complex in New York City got me to thinking about the concept of a community working together for everyone’s sake. According to the article, Morningside Gardens has kept their prices low over the years, so there can be a diverse community of owners. The controversy now is whether or not the prices should be raised, to be more in line with the current open market. There seems to be much heated discussion about this issue, and who knows where a compromise will be found. However, a quote in the article caught my attention.

One of the owners is in favor of raising the prices because: “This is what capitalism is all about ...It’s just a matter of freedom.” That is definitely true – most owners have the freedom to charge what they want, controlled only by what buyers are willing to pay. But is it in the best interest of the greater good? That question is

what most fascinates me. I tried to think of how we – as a society – encourage people to put the greater good first. Is this a lesson we learn in school? Do parents teach it to their children? How do we know to do this?

Certainly our government is based on this principle. Taxes are collected so that – in theory, anyway – everyone will benefit. We drive on roads, send our children to schools, are protected by a police force, are ruled by laws, and use public libraries – all paid for by the citizens. I can’t help wondering, though, if we would continue to do this, given the choice. This concept is challenging in a capitalist society, where we are torn between taking care of ourselves and doing what’s best for those around us.

Perhaps if there were enough for everyone, it would be easier. Years ago, I was involved in a program called Talking About Vietnam. It was held at Work Furlough in

Oakland, and during one of the post-movie discussions, a heated argument broke out between a man who had emigrated from Vietnam and a Vietnam veteran. The veteran was furious that his government and his taxes were supporting this man.

It struck me then - and it has stayed with me - that perhaps if there were sufficient resources for both of them, there wouldn't have been a problem. The vet didn't feel taken care of and so he didn't see why someone else should be. Neither of these men felt connected to each other - there was no community feeling, no shared appreciation for being part of a greater whole. And yet they actually had much in common - starting with the facts that they were both at Work Furlough, both in need of money and work, and both deeply affected by the Vietnam War.

How is this related to pub-

lic libraries? I see libraries as good examples of ways communities do come together. Public libraries are defined by the notion that they strive to meet the diverse needs of a diverse population. Each library user takes away something different, whether it is the answer to a question, a book for entertainment, use of the Internet or attendance at a program. By supporting libraries, communities are helping everyone. And they do support them: Bond measures pass in community after community because the voters are able to look beyond their own individual needs and see that serving the whole is the right thing to do.