



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Rainy days and nights are wonderful for reading one book after another...No television means more time for reading. Some folks might say ‘How boring’ but we say ‘Ahhhh!’”

-Priscilla Comen,
Mendocino Community
Library Notes, May 26,
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On a recent trip to Mendocino, I visited the local Mendocino Community Library. This small brightly lit and welcoming library is run entirely by volunteers, and funded by membership dues and fines, book sales, donations and gifts. The annual membership dues are reasonable, to say the least: \$15 for a family, \$8 for an individual and \$2 for students ages 8 to 18. With this membership, members can check out 10 books on a family membership or 5 books on a single one. Or they can choose from the extensive collection of videos, the growing collection of DVDs or the numerous donated books-on-tape.

The story of this library is a familiar one in public libraries – a group of women, led by one in particular, decide a town needs a library and through hard work, fundraising, networking and their own generosity, a library is born. Many of these libraries eventually evolve into public

ones, where the financial responsibility is given over to the general public. But there are still some subscription libraries like this left in the United States and they are wonderful examples of the ongoing dedication of a group of committed local volunteers.

These volunteers know what they are doing, too. The books are organized by sections, Dewey numbers and reference or circulating. They weed the collection and have book purchasing committees. Two computers – one for staff, one for the public – use CDs to help search the collection.

However, they are still hand-charging each item as it goes out. This means each book has a card in the front of it, slipped into a pocket. When a book is checked-out, the member puts his or her name and membership number on the card, which is kept by the library. The date due is stamped in the book and that’s how the reader knows when to bring it

back.

A few of the books in my library still have these pockets in the front, although we have for many years used barcodes and computers to check out our materials. The advantages to using a computer are obvious: It is easy to find out where a book is, how many times it has been checked out and if someone is waiting for it. It is fast for both checking out and checking in. So why do I find this simple method so appealing? In fact, why – with all I know about modern library technology and online databases and free Internet access – do I find the idea of the slow pace, gentle interactions and handwritten records so enticing?

I had a chance to ponder this, because I had an interesting chat with volunteer Denali Files about libraries, the Internet and modern ways versus the established ones. As she commented, change will even-

tually come, because over time the volunteers will be from a different generation. Ms. Files seemed comfortable with this concept, unlike me – caught up as I was in the charm of this old-fashioned library. And yet, I could also think of so many ways the membership could be expanded – simply adding one Internet computer would bring in younger people, as well as seniors who may be curious about email or online health and travel information or even articles about their favorite topics.

I guess it is fortunate whatever happens to small libraries like this isn't in my hands. If it were, I would probably still be standing in the middle of that room, mulling it over, as I watched the library members browsing the shelves, reading the *New York Times*, or chatting with the volunteers.