

Beyond Books: Getting the Most Out of Your Local Library



by Sue Douglass Fliess

As a child, it was both exciting and empowering to have your very own library card. All those books at your disposal and you could check out as many at a time as you wanted! According to several surveys analyzed by the American Library Association (ALA), there are an estimated 117,378 libraries of all kinds in the United States today, and 16,549 of them are public libraries. That's a lot of books.

As adults, we now understand that a library card is more than a plastic pass to unlimited reading. Libraries offer so much more than tomes on shelves. And just how much more is pleasantly surprising. While it varies from library to library, most public libraries in the country offer an array of materials and programs for all ages. Some offer adult poetry and book clubs, author events, guest speakers, literacy programs for adults, children and parenting workshops, as well as traditional story times. For example, in addition to typical library program offerings, Peter White Library in Marquette, MI, offers a passport application service, a genealogy and local history resource for Michigan, and a helpful Ask-a-Librarian direct email to field questions.

Although you may have easy access to on-line information, don't hesitate to contact your librarian with questions. Librarians are more than just masters of the Dewey Decimal System. Most librarians have a four-year undergraduate degree and a masters in Library Science, or Information Science, as it is now more commonly called. Librarians often bring database or cross-technology backgrounds into their multi-disciplinary work. Public librarians have an interest in just about everything because they must be able to tap into topics that vary across the board, for all kinds of people. "Never knowing what the next question might cover keeps us excited as we work to connect people with information, materials, programs and resources throughout the community and the world," says Bobbi Weesen-Baer, Children's Librarian at Mountain View Public Library in Mountain View, CA.

The Mountain View Public Library hosts workshops and summer reading programs which feature

storytelling, music, magicians and wild animals. They offer Montessori-based twos, threes and fours programs, and family story-times in English, Spanish and Mandarin. They are a resource for teachers and schools, providing information on literacy and child development. You can do research using online databases and reserve titles from home to save time. Not all libraries can afford to offer such in-depth service, but Weesen-Baer encourages people to “go in and get to know your library staff, find out what your library has to offer.” She adds, “In these mobile times, public libraries are a good starting place for getting to know a new community or for making friends. If you are a student or parent, adding a librarian as a resource strengthens your education team. Call or stop by, bring us your questions and suggestions. We’re here to help.”

Take a trip to your library. Discover what programs your library offers. You’re likely to find that your local librarian is more than happy to help you. A library is one of the few free resources in today’s pay-as-you-go world. Their mantra is to serve the unserved and underserved -- and that means they’ll meet you wherever you are on your quest for knowledge.

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