

Libraries Humanize the Information Age

“Why do we need libraries when we have the internet?” “We have Google; why do we need you?”

These questions are sometimes posed to us, and they deserve a thoughtful response. Regardless of the storied (pun intended) history of libraries - evidence of the first public library dates back about 2,619 years ago to Athens, Greece, and the first libraries ever go back even further to more than 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia – are libraries still relevant in the Information Age?

The answer is a resounding YES. In fact, libraries may be more needed than ever, for that very reason. We are barraged with an overload of information on a daily basis, and we can all benefit from a trusted, objective resource to help us wade through the daily data and make sense of it.

But it's more than that. Public libraries are free, welcoming community hubs where people of all ages, abilities, ethnicities, orientations, religions, cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds can convene on level ground. Equal access and opportunity to imagine, discover and connect is open to all. Our monthly calendar is jam-packed with entertaining and enriching options. Individuals and groups routinely gather here for a variety of reasons. Not to mention the outreach provided to those who are cannot physically get here.

And for those who hail from another land and are striving to navigate a daunting new culture, the library provides a nurturing environment and often, the first sense of community they experience in their new home.

Case in point: the Beginning English for Speakers of Other Languages class that meets here each Monday and Wednesday evenings at 6:00 p.m. The following is from someone who has taught this class at Guilderland Public Library:

I enjoy languages. Growing up in Guilderland in the 1950s and 60s we started French or Spanish in third grade and continued through high school. Then, in the Air Force I attended the Defense Language Institute to study Russian.

In the spring of 2017, New York Literacy held volunteer training here at Guilderland Public Library. I completed the training thinking I would become a tutor for an individual student. However, a group of seven Turkish residents signed up for ESL, and the literacy coordinator in Albany asked if I would teach them as a group with assistance from a translator. I agreed, with a bit of trepidation and excitement.

Our class met twice a week in the library. One common goal for most of the students was to be able to communicate better with their children's teachers and their neighbors.

One student had been bringing her three year old to weekly story time at the library. The mother learned a substantial amount of English by attending story time, and she would assist if our regular translator was absent.

These students were dedicated and determined, rarely missing a class. Even during Ramadan when some of them fasted from food and drink all day, they still came to class. They commented about how nice our library is – much more welcoming and friendly than what they experienced in Turkey.

One week, the lesson was about asking for directions. The following Monday, two students enthusiastically reported that when someone asked them where the restroom was at Crossgates, they were able to reply in English! One student obtained a job in a hotel. Other students continued their ESL classes in Albany or at BOCES. All of the students tested higher in English proficiency at the end of the program.

This year, we have students from China, Sudan, Belarus, Ukraine and Iran. We use the library's globe and maps to pinpoint their homeland. I want the students to be proud of both their native and adopted countries, and also to see the world as one big neighborhood. The students enjoy talking about their countries, their families and customs. Though customs may vary, feelings about family and homeland, favorite foods, and holidays are universal. Regardless of culture, people at the human level are really very similar. We all smile and laugh in the same language.

English can be puzzling and complicated, but my students try very hard to learn. It is rewarding to me to try to help them bring more English into their life. I also enjoy explaining American customs and the history of Guilderland and New York State, sometimes with humor. We look at pictures of kids playing soccer and football. I shrug as I say that even though the entire world calls it football, we call it soccer.

I create lessons in Microsoft Word and import photos into my documents. I do all my lesson plans on the library computers and copiers. I also use magazines from the library exchange to clip photos.

Through my students, I have discovered the wonderful Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk. Reading his novels has broadened my knowledge of Turkish history and culture. I even purchased four of his novels at our library book sale!

Teaching in this program makes me feel like a citizen of the world in my own little corner of it. At the end of each class, we applaud ourselves and each other. We pack up our books, say friendly goodbyes and bow to each other. I wish the whole world could do that.

Libraries, it can be argued, are as boundless as the internet...but they can also set the stage for personal victories. Sure, the WiFi provided between our walls can bring you the world - but meaningful experiences like these and so many others that happen here give the world context. Libraries provide what the internet cannot: face-to-face human connections that cross-culturally enhance our existence. While libraries are free, that in itself...is priceless.