

Volunteers mirror the meaning of libraries

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FULL TEXT

Few people really know what goes on behind the scenes in a library. Sometimes I think that's a good thing. But more often, I wish more people did.

While many people think that libraries are going to be a thing of the past, if they had a chance to see how overwhelmed most library staff are by their workload, they would probably have their opinion changed. This is why we feel such gratitude for the volunteers who offer their time and in so doing, get a glimpse of some of the behind the scenes activities in libraries.

Truth be told, libraries are dependent upon their volunteers. From the smallest to the largest, libraries would be in a world of hurt without them. In fact, volunteers dedicate so much time to libraries that here in Kaukauna, their time represents a part-time employee. Volunteers at Appleton Public Library represent three full-time and one part-time employees, Neenah Public Library three full-time employees, Elisha D. Smith Public Library one part time employee and the Gerard H. Van Hoof Library/James J. Siebers Library also a part-time employee.

Those generous people have, in their combined hours, performed a variety of mainly boring and repetitive jobs. Volunteers shelve books, clean DVDs and CDs, water plants, help with local history research, digitize information, assist with programs, greet, serve on committees, and clean up minor messes. All of these actions allow paid staff the time to focus on critical patron related services, like checking in books, helping with technology, assisting at service desks and preparing for programs.

In our staff workroom we have a mobile of photos of our volunteers in tribute. But there are just as many who simply don their "volunteer" name tags and go about doing what's asked of them without recognition. In my more "whimsical" moments I wonder "why?" Why do they so willingly surrender so much time doing such mundane tasks and often for so little in return?

For the most part they simply love libraries. They love what libraries are and stand for: freedom of access to any and all information, a place where people are welcomed no matter their race or religion. Free access to information, technology, education and entertainment available to all in a variety of formats. A place to dream and imagine without fear, a place for people to meet and openly discuss the latest topics of interest or just sit and relax with a favorite book or magazine.

Volunteers are a part of what libraries are and stand for. They are part of that larger something that we who work at libraries sometimes forgot or take for granted. Volunteers help me to remember what libraries really stand for and why they exist. Without pretense or express reward, they each help in their own way to preserve a foundational part of a free, democratic society.

Maybe the question is not why volunteers offer their time as why more people don't. If you value libraries and what

they mean, what they offer, and what they bring to our way of life, I invite you to visit your local library and see how you can become part of something so central to a democratic way of life.

To volunteer at your local library, stop in or visit their website. Each library in our area has many volunteer opportunities and a volunteer application form for you to fill out to begin your journey of service.

Tony Wiczorek is the director of the Kaukauna Public Library. Leaders from Fox Valley libraries write a monthly column.

CAPTION:

Kaukauna Public Library is among the Fox Valley libraries bustling with activities.

Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

DETAILS

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