President's Column

by John Moorman

As I was pondering what to put in this issue’s President’s Column, several things came to mind. I could talk about the recent Virginia Library Association public library postcard campaign, discuss the state or lack thereof of library funding, or muse on how the association should take advantage of new technology to communicate better with its members and the public that we serve.

Then an email came from Diantha McCauley, director of the Augusta County Public Library and second vice president of VLA, that one of her library users had her essay selected as a winner in the March Women’s Day essay contest, “How the Public Library Can Save You Money.” As the essay was not published in the paper issue due to lack of space, I am using my column to share this essay with you. Congratulations go to Tammy Thomas of Stuarts Draft, Virginia, for her essay “School’s In,” which follows (with the kind permission of Woman’s Day and the author).

“My public library literally helped put me through college! I was 34, and I had chosen to forgo school years before in order to work part-time and raise my children. But now that my sons would be entering high school, I started thinking that I wanted to be an English teacher. I had always enjoyed reading and writing, and loved volunteering at my sons’ school. Still, money was tight, and becoming a teacher seemed like an impossibility. Yet I couldn’t let go of the dream. I went to an open house at a nearby community college, just to get more information. I ended up taking a leap of faith and enrolling. I applied for financial aid and student loans for the tuition costs, and then collected the syllabi for my classes. That’s when I realized that I had made a serious miscalculation: I hadn’t counted on the cost of textbooks. They could cost anywhere from $50 to $250 each per semester, and I always needed at least three. For a family on an extremely tight budget, this expense was a real problem.

“I looked around for used books, but even those were more than I could comfortably afford. So I decided to go to the Augusta County Library on a mission to keep my college dream alive. I got mixed results. While the library did have many of the books on the recommended reading list, they didn’t have the textbooks.

“I decided to talk to the reference librarians to see if they had any suggestions. They explained that they might be able to get some of the books from college libraries in the state by means of an interlibrary loan. The suggestion was a lifesaver! From the time I started college until the time I graduated, I relied on interlibrary loans to help me get almost all of my textbooks. This saved me thousands of dollars.

“In August 2000, I began my career as an eighth-grade language arts teacher, and I now also chair our school’s English department. I’ve also just completed my master’s degree in education administration, using interlibrary loans for my books, of course! My relationship with the public library has continued to grow. As a teacher, I view the library as a great community partner. Every year I arrange for the librarians to come to my school and tell my students about the wonderful books and programs available to them. In the summer, I have my summer-school students participate in the library’s summer reading program. The children enjoy hearing about exciting new books, and they love winning prizes for the hours they invest in reading. The library has been a wonderful resource for enriching my students’ learning experience, and a great tool for a teacher with limited means. Last summer I volunteered at the library, which is suffering from funding cuts, to help repay the librarians for all they have done for me, my family, and students. It is my hope that students, like me, will develop a lifelong love for their library.”

Thanks go to Tammy Thomas and Women’s Day for this excellent example of what libraries can accomplish for their users. As we work on our daily tasks, sometimes we lose track of the bigger picture. Users such as Thomas remind us of our value to their lives and provide us with encouragement when we cannot see the forest for the trees.