

Guest opinion— **Who needs libraries, anyway?**

By **SANDY PUCCIO**

After listening to a talk show host rant that public libraries are obsolete and a waste of tax-payer money, I decided enough was enough. Usually librarians are a quiet bunch who rarely speak above a whisper much less take to the streets and fight back. As a public librarian, it's time for me to stand up and say, "I'm mad as hell and I won't take it anymore!"

Public libraries are as varied as the communities they serve, yet they still have one thing in common: whether you are a bag lady, bootlegger or billionaire you are entitled to free access to information. That's the beauty – the rich display of democracy at its finest, the right to be an informed public as Franklin and Jefferson intended.

Responding to a rush of recession-time visitors, libraries these days have turned themselves into one stop shops for digital job searches and free Internet service. They provide specialized high ticket business, legal, and health databases to the public at no charge.

While computer and job-search assistance is highly significant, it isn't the whole story of libraries. In Valley Center, the branch is a portal to literacy and film, classic and contemporary. It's a place for lectures, local performing artists and exhibitions. It is a coffee house, an information center for visiting tourists and a safe place for kids.

Andrew Carnegie's original idea in founding his string of free public libraries was that they'd be gathering places for young people – that once at the library, they'd learn to read. He built a boxing gymnasium into one of his Pittsburgh libraries, a swimming pool into another. The Valley Center Branch may not have a gym or a swimming pool but it is adjacent to a nature path, a local history museum and offers free Yoga in the community room four times a week.

There are 33 branches in the San Diego County Library system, including the VC Branch. From those branches County residents borrowed 10 million items last year.

Clueless? Not our library customers.

Who needs libraries? I can't think of anyone who doesn't.

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