

"Federation Corner" column
Montgomery Sentinel - December 24, 2009

Treasure our county libraries
by Peggy Dennis, MCCF President

The Montgomery County Public Library (MCPL) system is one of the crown jewels among our many and varied public services. It is also one most likely to take a substantial hit in the coming budget cycle. This may well be because most residents think of their local library simply as a place to pick up the occasional book or leaf through a newspaper or magazine. But our libraries and librarians offer so much more.

I am probably one of the library systems most dedicated users. I cannot begin to calculate how many thousands of dollars our family has saved by the judicious use of this resource over the years. When we decided to design our dream home, we did not look for an architect. I went to the library. I found books on timber frame construction and on the renaissance of the "post and beam" home led by Ted Benson in New England. We read, studied photos of fabulous homes, and started drawing and working on floor plans.

I went through stacks of back copies of Country Living, House Beautiful, Architecture Digest and Home and Garden. I made Xerox copies of the doors, windows, fireplaces and rooms that struck my fancy, and took copious notes on the local distributors and retailers carrying building products I wanted to look at. For instance, when PEPCO's energy conservation consultant suggested that we look into water source heat pumps, I found books at the library on this HVAC technology which was relatively obscure at the time.

When it came time to build our home, I turned to the library for books on how to be your own general contractor. I read and made copies of timelines and checklists; then did it myself. All of this work, with help from my local libraries, must have saved us between 50 and 100 thousand dollars.

When our son started showing signs of difficulty concentrating on his work at school and at home, the librarian at Potomac found the book "Why Johnny Can't Concentrate" for me. This was my introduction to Attention Deficit Disorder and all the theories, therapies and medications used to control this vexing condition. When we ultimately pulled Alex out of the school system and decided to try homeschooling for a year, the library had an entire shelf of materials just for homeschoolers. The selection included "How To" books and magazines, and information on groups and associations for homeschoolers in Maryland and Montgomery County. What might otherwise have been a lonely and daunting undertaking quickly became an exciting and wonderful adventure for all of us.

When Alex's writing tutor asked me to find audio tapes that he could listen to then take notes from, the librarian introduced me to the racks of audio lectures produced by The Teaching Company. These tapes (and now CDs, DVDs and downloads) cover the best university courses given by the best professors in America. Soon Alex, a 10th grader at the time, was utterly absorbed in the lectures of Professor Thomas Childers of the University of Pennsylvania on "World War II: A Military & Social History". He went on to minor in history at college.

The library has thousands of books on tape and on CD. They make long car trips go by in a flash. Apart from the Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers mysteries which we love to listen to, my own top recommendation for a surprise treat is T Rex and the Crater of Doom by Dr. Walter Alvarez, Professor of Geology at UC Berkeley. This is a serious geology book but written for the lay reader. Dr. Alvarez portrays not only his career, but the work done collaboratively by scientists from a variety of fields and a number of countries over the span of more than twenty years to unravel the mystery of why the Cretaceous period ended suddenly with the mass extinction of dinosaurs and many other animals. It is fascinating.

When my husband and I were planning a trip to Tanzania, we wanted to learn a little Swahili before embarking on our journey. We discovered the MCPL's system for foreign language learning. The Library has a contract with Mango Tree, a computer language learning system similar to "The Rosetta Stone." The library will set you up with your own direct access so that you can learn whatever foreign language you choose from the comfort of your home computer, and all for free.

Apart from using the internet to access the library system's catalogue to locate and put holds on books, I had not until recently explored their entire website. What a revelation! There is a whole world of programs and services of which even I was unaware. I suggest you check it out, at the following link: <http://bit.ly/mclibrary>. I am sure that you will be amazed, and will come away believing that this is one area where your taxes are being spent in a magnificently productive manner.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net