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People and Places Essay

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Not Just Books

Since August 10, 2003, the Ashburn Library has sat on the corner of Breezy Hill Drive, where the residential, single-family households of Ashburn, Virginia intersect with the main street, Hay Road. Unlike the houses surrounding it, the library’s architecture is quite modern. The front of this cream and terra-cotta building consists of gridded metal and green-tinted glass walls, which jut out in a triangular shape muchlike the bow of a cruise-ship. It stands slightly taller than the rest of the one-story building. The entrance—an automatic sliding-glass door inattentive patrons might mistake as part of the glass—is found on the right side of this triangular shape. It is shaded by a metal awning that juts out from the main wall of the building, which is supported by a row of red brick columns. The library faces away from the two-story homes, overlooking the parking lot, Hay Road, and the grassy slope beyond.

The first automatic door reveals a silent, sun-lit room with ivory-colored bricks stretching from floor to ceiling. Upon closer inspection, each brick is engraved with the names of those who helped build and fund the library, including names of families, individuals, and organizations like the Ashburn Farm Association. A large bronze plaque hangs upon the wall, carved with the words “Ashburn Library” above an image of an open book. The pages list the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors and Board of Trustees. Engraved below the book is the captivating, yet mysterious (slightly ominous) phrase, “The time you spend here lasts a lifetime.”

The next automatic door reveals a dim, empty hall—still not inside the library. The chill of the air-conditioning immediately hits, greatly contrasting the sauna-like warmth of the entryway. A small nook filled with informative pamphlets is exposed; topics range drastically from how to teach children about 911, to how to fill out a 1040 tax form. The library rules, posted on either side of the thermostat (which is kept under lock-and-key so no one can set it to a less frostbite-inducing temperature), state the 17 actions prohibited on the property. A few rules stand out amongst the rest: no sitting on the floor of the lobby or in the hallways, and no sleeping in the building. What happens if someone falls asleep while studying?

Another automatic door leads, *finally*, into the main lobby. Any elegant expectations the exterior may have suggested fall away, taking with it the previously serene silence. It’s replaced by the rhythmic sounds of barcode scanners and occasional high-pitched squeals. The “Returns” area’s newly-installed check-in system produces a faint, metallic hum as it slides items along a conveyor belt. Children can—and many do—bend over, peer through the slot, and watch their books slide away. Across from the “Returns” area, a long wooden bench curves towards the Children’s section. A mural resembling an excavation site decorates the wall above with fake dinosaur bones, ancient plants, and pottery. The bench stops before four built-in display-cases, which house curiosities like a 535-million-year-old Trilobite fossil replica, a palm-sized 50-million-year-old shark tooth, Civil War bullets, and a spider encased in Amber.

A little girl in a pink flowery dress with cookie-crumbs around her mouth skips up to the mural with her father. She points to the excavation scene.

“Scary!”

“No, it’s not scary. It’s a dinosaur bone. Touch it,” he chuckles softly, gesturing to the closest bone.

The little girl steps forward hesitantly, looking at her father for reassurance. Then, she quickly taps the wall and giggles. They walk off together, passing underneath the archway that leads into the Children’s section, a massive room filled with short, red metal bookshelves and tiny tables—perfectly kid-sized. The room is filled with children scurrying around, parents chasing after them. Cheerful hollers, excited squeals, and whines echo throughout the room, bouncing off the high, curved ceiling where florescent lights dangle in neat rows. Some children sit on tiny stools before computers, playing educational games with the volume set so excruciatingly high even the deaf could hear. One little boy bangs his fists on the keyboard excitedly, squealing with each right answer. The father-daughter duo walk by the computers, past the Children’s reference desk, and wander towards one of the blue and yellow tables near the back wall where the picture-books for toddlers are tossed chaotically in a bin.

The Children’s section hosts more than just Story Time for toddlers, which can receive as many as 75 participants (not counting the parents!). This includes (but is not limited to): the humorous and educational “Butterfly Habitats with Jerry Schneider,” a “Georgia O’Keefe” art-making event (Picture this: kids painting pretty flowers and grotesque ram skulls), and ESOL tutoring sessions. They also host “Micro-WHAT?,” a one-of-a-kind science event that, oddly enough, allows children to destroy things in the microwave. Aurora, a children’s librarian, hosted “Micro-WHAT?” for the first-time last year, and she’s absolutely proud of it.

“We talked about the science behind heat. I had books and microwaves and we blew things up in the microwave. It was fun!” she claims, brushing her shoulder-length blonde hair behind her ear. “We put a chip bag in the microwave, and the aluminum foil of the bag would react to the microwave and shrink. We put a lightbulb in a bowl of water and put that in the microwave, and it lit up. But, if we didn’t put any water, it would explode.” She began to laugh before adding “We also blew up Peeps!”

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Open Monday through Sunday (excluding special holidays), the library operates 10am to 9pm Monday through Thursday, but closes at 5pm on Fridays and Saturdays. Sundays, however, it’s only open from 1pm to 5pm, forcing many to crowd into the library during these short four hours.

 “You’re always likely to see moms and their kids,” Tammy Cornwell, a full-time employee in the Circulation Department, explains. She’s an older woman with wide-rimmed glasses and white-grey hair tossed up in a bun. From afar, she looks intimidating. But, up close, Tammy’s a sweet, helpful librarian who has proven she can wear the nicest smile on her face, regardless of the questions.

After working at the Ashburn Library for four years (not including her stints at other Loudoun County libraries for a previous 2 years), Tammy can say with certainty that, while moms and kids are typical regulars to the library, they’re especially noticeable on the weekends, which she deems the “crazy days” of the week.

“There are always kids’ programs at the beginning of every day, like the Baby and Preschool Story Times,” Tammy says, pulling out a pamphlet of events hosted by the Loudoun County Library system, “But, everyone who was working during the week seems to come on the weekend.” Sundays especially are “really hectic.”

Yet, moms and kids don’t make up all the library’s foot-traffic. “Senior citizens usually come around midday because it’s quiet. And, after 3 o’clock, the teens, high-schoolers, tutors, and older adults get off from school or work and come here afterwards to study or to pick up books,” Tammy says.

She’s right. Unlike the Children’s section, the large room to the right of the lobby and front desk is nearly silent, as if sound couldn’t travel beyond the archway. The same florescent lights dangle from yet another tall, curved ceiling. Just beyond the arched entrance to this area are rows upon rows of off-white-colored metal bookshelves. The first few are dedicated to Young Adult fiction, while the next few are reserved for books ready for pick-up, which are organized with little signs labeled “A,” “B,” “C,” and so forth. Beyond those shelves are rows dedicated to Adult fiction. Peering down the rows, past a young boy and mother picking up books, one can see four tables hidden back up against the wall.

As the mother leads her son away with a hand lightly placed on his back, a teenage blonde is revealed, sitting alone at one of those hidden tables. Her laptop is open, and her binder is thrown open on her right. Her keys, wallet, and phone are tossed to her left. She flips her long curly hair over her left shoulder from time to time before finally pulling all of it to the side and braiding it. She tosses her braid over her shoulder, shakes out her hands, and gets back to work. A few minutes later, however, she unravels her braid and flings her hair back over her shoulder with an exasperated huff. She quickly pulls out headphones to drown out the quiet talking from the table in front of her, where two females sit—one a young girl with black hair and a furry pink jacket, and the other a middle-aged brunette with wide-rimmed glasses. An Asian man walks up to join them.

“We worked more on editing our story today,” the woman continues to discuss their session as well as the girl’s story, “The Dog and the Shadow,” with her guardian. She then turns to the girl, saying, “You want to introduce your characters, the setting, talk more about what the problem is… So, I’ll see you next week!” She waves, watching the girl clutch her binder close to her chest until she’s out of sight. Then her next student arrives, a dark-skinned boy wearing a hoodie and black glasses. They begin discussing Star Wars and space.

An older woman momentarily blocks the view down the pick-up aisle before crouching to inspect the lower shelves. She plops down criss-crossed on the floor—*breaking a library rule*—and reads for a few minutes, before painstakingly pulling herself to her feet and walking off. A child’s voice echoes loudly as they walk towards the nonfiction section of the library, which is separated from the Adult fiction section by a vast expanse of four-person tables and an assortment of tables with PC and Apple computers. People are sprinkled about—most sit individually, or in pairs like the creative-writing tutor and her students.

“[The tutors] usually meet up here for the spaces and tables available.” Tammy gestures towards the dozens of tables between the fiction and nonfiction sections, where a brown-haired woman sits beside a teenage blonde in a short-sleeved Redskins jersey. How she wasn’t turning into an icicle is mystifying.

Past those women, a middle-aged woman wearing a red hijab is bent over a worksheet. She stutters as she pronounces words. When she pauses, the tutor leans over and quietly helps her sound the words out. Beyond, a child plays Minecraft on one of the few Apple desktops.

On two of the few cushioned, auditorium-style chairs behind the Adult fiction section, a little blond girl in a hot-pink top with a flower-printed backpack plops down with a young woman—her tutor. The tutor places a paper before the little girl, and asks her to read.

“Jake is going on a trip. He and mom take a taxi to the airport. It’s my first trip to the airport…” The child continues. The teacher scoots her armchair closer to the girl, their knees touching as she leans over to help with tough words. They eventually work on shapes and word-problems.

As the tutor leaves an hour later, she says, “Yes, a *lot* of people come here to tutor. Usually it’s just teachers who do this during their free time. We’re not allowed to do it out of the school we teach at. So, we do it at the library because it’s common ground, a public place.”

This is much the same for other tutors like Clark Ragsdale. He’s an older, round man in a grey work-shirt and frown lines as deep as canyons. But, they disappear when he smiles.

“I’m probably here four to six times per week,” Ragsdale admits, motioning to the tables around him, “I tutor kids in AP Calculus and AP Chemistry, as well as do SAT and ACT prep in those fields.” He admits this isn’t something he does for the library, nor for his school.

“It’s kind of my gig,” Ragsdale grins. He gets up from his table behind the Adult fiction shelves, says goodbye to the student he was tutoring in chemistry (something about moles and mass) and walks off to meet with his next student.

However, not everyone comes here simply to study or tutor. According to Tammy, there have been incidents where people seemingly forget what a library is *actually* for.

“One time, a guy studying in the library ordered a pizza and had it delivered here. The delivery guy came up to the counter and said, ‘I have a pizza for so-and-so,’ but we just said there was nobody here by that name.” She chuckled quietly with her co-worker before reverting back to proper-librarian-mode, saying “We allow people to bring small snacks into the library, but not full meals. They can eat those meals in the lobby of the library, but not inside.” Neither Tammy nor her co-worker admitted whether he got his pizza or not.

The pizza-man seems like the epitome of all crazy, atypical events at the library. However, this is not the case. While explaining late fees, “lost item” fees, and the highest amount of late fees a library-goer could rack up before their account is frozen, Tammy pointed over to the “Books on Audio” section, a little nook between the Children’s and Adult sections consisting of audiobooks, CDs, DVDs and a few games. Then, she began telling the tale of the man who claims the title for the highest fees ever recorded.

“I think it’s somewhere around $1000,” Tammy says. It turns out the man checked-out videogames from the library and never returned them. He began racking up quite a debt in late fees and “lost item” fees before the library realized…

“He was selling them on eBay.” Tammy wears a look of despair, shaking her head, “He’s never going to come back. We’ll probably never get the money back.”

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While one wouldn’t think about it, there is quite a hierarchy within the library. The bottom of the food-chain consists of the library volunteers. Tammy explains that “Adults and children over 15 years of age are able to volunteer in the adult section of the library for two hours per week. Teenagers make up the majority of the volunteer staff, as they are usually doing the work for extra credit or for their school’s honors societies. If they are doing it for school, we help them record their volunteer hours and help them submit it to the school.” However, the elderly are also known to occasionally volunteer at the library.

Many volunteers roam the Adult fiction and Nonfiction sections, but two in particular stood out. One high-school aged male admitted he’d been volunteering for a couple months now at the library for school.

“I’m doing it for NHS—National Honors Society—to get the required number of volunteer hours,” he explains, rubbing his neck, “But, I do plan to continue after I’ve finished school.” He gets back to work, walking towards the Magazines and Newspapers section, a designated “quiet area” and the emptiest library area, where the stagnant air smells like freshly-printed newspaper, and where metal chairs sit empty and cushioned couches remain in nearly-pristine condition—save for a few creases caused by the occasional old men in winter coats.

Another volunteer, a junior at Briar Woods High School named Natalie, offers a different reason for volunteering. She and her twin brother have been volunteering since last summer, and plan to volunteer until college.

“I do it for fun,” Natalie explains. She pauses, but decides to continue her statement, “My two older brothers volunteered here before me, so I was kind of following their footsteps. I really like it, it’s peaceful,” she motions to the quiet room surrounding us.

Other than the volunteers, there are full-timers like Tammy and Aurora who work the circulation and reference desks. Tammy explains workers at the circulation desk don’t need an MLS, Masters of Library Science degree, to work; they’re able to check books in and out and answer simple questions. Those at the reference desks, like Aurora, answer more specific questions; however, they also do not need a degree to work.

At the top of the food-chain sit the librarians. They are required to have MLS degrees, which provide them with knowledge about library management, source evaluation, database, and even web-programming skills—allowing them to answer complex questions regarding the library’s databases. Librarians also need this degree to host many of the library’s programs, such as Baby Storytime, ESOL programs, and other library-run events.

“I didn’t know this before I applied, but getting a job here is highly competitive. It’s good to volunteer here and slowly work your way up the ladder because it gives you a chance to gain experience,” Tammy says. She admits there isn’t a lot of turnover within the library staff; many employees have worked at the library since it opened back in 2003, and others have been working for the public library system for 30 to 40 years.

“If anyone does leave, it is usually because there is more money. The Fairfax location pays more, not just for librarians but in general. Everybody knows that,” Tammy says.

While most folks ask the library staff general questions about where to find the bathroom or how to check out books without their library card, some people do not seem to understand what sorts of questions librarians can and cannot help with. “A ten-year-old asked us whether his boogers would fall out of his nose if he didn’t have any nose hairs,” Tammy laughed, looking over at her grinning co-worker. “We gave him a book on the human anatomy!”

Aurora, the children’s librarian, also has been asked bizarre questions in her time at the Ashburn Library, but one question stuck with her.

“While I was still working on the adult side of the library, a woman called and asked if we kept birth certificates, and whether we would have her birth certificate.” Aurora burst into a fit of giggles. “Personal heads up! We don’t have birth certificates here!”

 It was enlightening to hear these stories, see just how misunderstood the library was to so many different people. Many do not realize just how much the library does besides checking in and out books for public use. It was striking to hear Aurora admit to having this same revelation, and what she says remains as something simple, yet eye-opening and powerful:

 “It’s a lot more than just books here.”

Works Cited

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