

8-1-1997

Rude and crude?: When teens in your library respond negatively to you, think back to how you approached them

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Recommended Citation

Anthony Bernier and D. T. Herald. "Rude and crude?: When teens in your library respond negatively to you, think back to how you approached them" *School Library Journal* (1997): 47.

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Teens & Libraries

Managing Collections, Services, and Programs for Young Adults

Rude and Crude?

By Anthony Bernier and Diana Tixier Herald

When teens in your library respond negatively to you, think back to how you approached them.

Identifiable groups of young people are being singled out across America in large cities and small towns as problems for libraries. Whether they are skaters, taggers, or gang members, their mere presence strikes fear into the hearts of library users and staff. Are they the problem or are we failing to see them as part of the client base we serve? How can we deal constructively with them?

Both of us have extensive experience with teens, on and off the job. That has lead us to look at young adults with deep respect—even ones with skateboards under their arms.

The World of Skateboarders

Have you ever watched a truly good skateboarder skate? It is an amazing display of strength, coordination, and dexterity. But when librarians think about skateboarders, what comes to mind? That they are destructive.

I've heard time and time again that libraries have been damaged by skateboarders. *American Libraries* ("Skateboarders on a Roll," March 1997, p. 21) reported that the San Francisco Public Library blamed skateboarders for \$200,000 worth of damage. But after following the sport for a couple of years now, I have never seen damage to a building that could be linked to skateboarding.

Another common complaint is that skaters are rude. The same *American Libraries* article stated that the skateboard-

er gave a city official the "the finger" when he tried to show the skater the damage he was causing. But I've found teenage skateboarders to be as polite as other teens. When in New York for ALA last summer I spotted some skateboarders on Broadway. They looked at me warily as I approached, but when I said I was a fan looking for the best places to observe they eagerly gave me directions and even volunteered to show me the best locales.

People generally react similarly to the way they are approached. Most skaters are wary because they experience so much discrimination. Has your library posted a "no skateboarding sign"? Do you stop people who come through the door with a skateboard? Does your library subscribe to *Thrasher*, *Slap*, or *Transworld Skateboarding*?

I think we fear skateboarding because it is a sport unique to youth. Older bones and muscles just can't take it. In an "us and them" world, we don't skate and they do.

Getting Gangs to Cooperate

Sometimes problems are real and not just perceived. Still, the people who cause problems are the same people we are here to serve. Keeping that in mind can put a different slant on the issue.

If you need to change teen behavior, consider appealing directly to their code of ethics. Contrary to the hyperbole of self-serving politicians and cliched images, even gangs adhere to stringent ethical mores.

Although it may not be obvious, youth gangs care deeply about their communities. Some are indeed willing to die for them. Yet for the past quarter century, America's social and political agendas have ignored the need to help youth legally express neighborhood pride.

Last summer, the Los Angeles Public Library's Echo Park Branch got tagged

and littered with beer bottles every Friday evening by our "Big Top" gang. They strategically used our poorly placed branch as a party spot. After the 1971 Los Angeles earthquake, the branch had been "temporarily" relocated to an old building shoe-horned between an eight-lane highway and a dead-end street. I can actually understand the desire to party there. The freeway camouflaged the cranked-up car stereos and the cul-de-sac hid them. That's reasonable, even considerate, compared to being a nuisance under someone's window.

Leaving graffiti and broken bottles, however, was not considerate. But rather than calling in the police, we appealed to their sense of honor and neighborhood. One Friday night, we left them a message: "Dear Big Top: Come on, you guys. The little kids come here on Saturdays. Do you want them to think of Echo Park like this?"

Simply that.

The next morning, predictably, we found that the building had been tagged with the usual large, stylized spray-can lettering. But this time there was a difference. Following their tag was a single word, in a Roman hand: "Sorry."

One could argue that we shouldn't have had to appeal to neighborhood pride, or anything else for that matter. "Zero tolerance!" the hard-liners cry. But zero tolerance fails every day all over the country. At Echo Park we understand that youth, even those in gangs, help constitute the community. Criminalizing them does nothing but perpetuate useless and costly cycles of recrimination and retaliation. Nor does it help bridge the service gap between libraries and disenfranchised youth.

The library appealed to Big Top's respect for the community. They, in turn, have taken their spray can truce seriously. The graffiti in which they said they were sorry was their last. We've not been tagged since.

When they know us and we know them, we'll all find that underneath we aren't so different after all.

Teens and Libraries columnist Carolyn Caywood will return in October. Anthony Bernier (echopl@lapl.org) is Young Adult Librarian at the Echo Park Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. Skateboarding fan Diana Tixier Herald (dherald@wic.net) is the author of *Teen Genreflecting* (Libraries Unlimited, 1997).

