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The case against libraries as 'safe places'

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SOAP BOX

l\ LiBil,l\Y TEEN SEI\ViCES i>ii"\ECTspeAkS OUT: THE CASE ll(illiNST LiBI\AI\iES AS "SAFE pLACES"

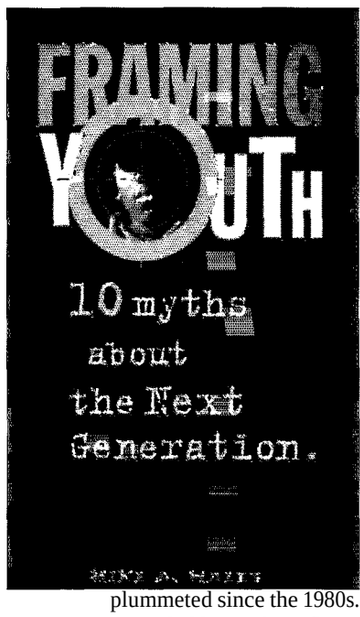
ANTHONY BERNIER

*[**Editor's Note:** Following is a response to VOE<!:S February 2003 theme issue,* ***Libraries as Safe Havens for Teens****]*

AB public funding pressures mount and America forces libraries to seek private resources to provide basic services, libraries must fmd ways to position themselves for fund-granting audiences. While the circumstances leading to this shift remain a public policy disgrace, libraries nevertheless must pitch themselves in ways that will get heard. There are ways to get heard and ways to stray. Promoting libraries as "safe places," particularly with respect to young adult services, forces libraries to stray from their community connections, offering only an illusion instead.

The library shares its public space with people of all ages and interests. Although our professional ethics laudably oppose surveillance cameras in the stacks, what happens when adult lurkers-those seemingly permanent features of public libraries-encounter young people in unwelcome ways? How can library staffs defend the topics teenagers want to discuss in library programs to adults who don't think the library is an appropriate place for such talk? Librarians will face accusations that we have not kept our promise to provide that illusive safe place.

To serve young people's developmental needs, libraries must provide a wide range of materials, sources, and formats. When we promote libraries as safe places, what will happen the first time a member of the community becomes enraged at the scantily clad bathing suit model on the cover of **Sports Illustrated** in the teen area? What happens when someone else spies a teenager on a Web site to which she objects? What happens when someone hears a song lyric or bumps up against an unpopular political idea viewed as dangerous to young minds? What happens when the materials that young people *themselves* produce are seen as ill-fitting for a public institution?



Indeed, one of our strongest young adult advocates, Dorothy Broderick, has become legendary for promoting the posting of a sign at the entrance to every public library: "If you don't find something here that offends you, please see a librarian." Another eminent advocate, Patrick Jones, recently put it more baldly: "Is some of the material that teens would access [in the library] harmful? Of course, it is. But is it more harmful to deny access to information they want and need? Again, of course it is."[1] The freedom to be offended in the public library extends as much to the civil liberties and the random curiosities of our young people as to adults.

Perhaps most important, the concept of safe libraries ruptures connections between the library and its community. It sets up a false dichotomy (safe library/unsafe community). It implies that our communities are sick and dangerous places, and that somehow libraries exist in hermetically sealed vacuums hovering over neighborhoods as havens of freedom and tranquility. AB with all false dichotomies, neither characterization rings true. Libraries exist *within* their communities-they adhere to and appeal to local conditions and values just as schools, religious institutions, and commercial interests do. Libraries cannot separate from or float above the communities they serve.

Ultimately, we must address the fundamental yet often overlooked question: What danger presses the library into this impossible Building-on-the-Hill role? Are churches and religious places viewed as dangerous? No. Are movie houses? No. Are malls generally regarded as violence-ridden? No. Are schools the places from which young people must flee into libraries in order to find safety? No worthy school administrator admits to that, nor would any self-respecting parent group confess that *their* school is unsafe. Factually, they would be right. Save for a few tragic and catastrophic incidents, schools remain the safest age-segregated institution for young people in our entire society.

So what *exactly* makes some people view the library as such a vital safe place? Underlying the calls for libraries to stand up as sanctuaries is the assumption that it's those kids without after-school or supervised activities. It's those marauding hoards roaming the streets without soccer or violin practice who prey on the weaker and more vulnerable. Danger equals teens. Many authors and so-called scholars have created a cottage industry of publishing books and reports that microscopically investigate what they call "the secret life of teens." Most libraries bought these books that report on the dangers of cliques, bullies, gangs, and "queen bee" hives. An entire vocabulary of youth has sprung to life in the last decade: violent predators, monsters, homicidal roaming packs, an entire generation lost in the chaos of adolescence. Do a catalog search and compile your own list.

Such accusations in the media, in publishing, and at political podiums portray after-school streets riddled with youth violence. Not only do these accusations come without evidence in their calls for safe libraries, but furthermore, the evidence does not exist.

AB sociologist Mike Males has been telling us for years, the evidence is that risky youth behavior in all categories and at all levels has been low and declining for at least twenty-five years.[2] Felony arrests, assaults, and drug and alcohol abuse among teenagers, to name just a few behaviors, have all plummeted since the 1980s. Some chaos.

Fueled by resilient flairs of moral panic such as the one that still lingers after the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, zero-tolerance measures, including truancy sweeps, curfews, on-campus security guards, and anti-drug abuse programs, have all failed to prove their value. These zero-tolerance policies divert precious resources from schools' real needs-teacher training and retention or critically needed facilities or enrichment programs such as music, arts, and even library instruction. According to the statistics, if we want to spend dollars reducing violence experienced by youth, we would be better off funding domestic violence programs.

Engaging in fallacious accusations of students-run-amok perpetuates a very narrow defmition of young-people-as-students. Teenagers are fur more than just students. Assigning libraries the role of "safe place for students" mirrors the recent reductionist theory of education itself as the mere quantifiable results of high-stakes standardized tests.

Although fallacies about young peoples' behavior, especially that of minority youth, remain a lightening rod for public fear and anger and anxiety, the actual evidence does not play well when libraries are forced to compete for the same grant and foundation dollars as homeless centers, domestic violence shelters, and adult literacy programs. Thus are we increasingly obliged to participate in the moral panic-of-the-day, pressured to perpetuate untruths about our own young adult patrons in order to save them in book-lined sanctuaries.

Apparently young people are not worthy of funding unless we demonize them first.

Libraries cannot deliver safe spaces any better than we can insure that wisdom will come to those reading our collections. And we should not promise that we can.

The newspapers cajole us into believing that conscientious adults follow young people's every move. But come on. Most of the danger to youth results from systematic deprivations like poverty, lack of health care, and parents dead tired from working two underpaid jobs.

Of course, none of these conditions mean that libraries do not offer young people valuable opportunities to connect positively with adults in ways that they might not do otherwise. Gail Bush's *Safe Haven* essay in the February **VOYA** (pages 438-39) illustrates this point in stirring terms. Many of *us* establish precious connections with young people as we move out from behind our desks and into the challenging experiences with which young people must contend every day. Whenever we welcome young people into the library to serve on Teen Advisory Boards, as volunteers, as program participants and attendees, even just as patrons, we know we change their lives.

In many cases, individual staff members might indeed substantially assist a young person in need. I recently learned of a library clerk who effectively adopted a sixteen-year old boy, offering him intermittent refuge from a catastrophic family situation and even worse foster care. This library clerk is probably the only reliable adult support in the boy's life. In another instance, a seventeen-year-old boy continues to write to me, nearly two years after I left his neighborhood for another job, to say that although his failing grades and recent expulsion from school don't reflect the positive upturn that he feels he's making, he still visits the library to check out books on computers, careers, and girls. And just two weeks ago, I helped a sixteen-year-old girl fmd shelter from an abusive stepfather.

But we must not confuse-or let others lead us into confusing-our individual stories of connection, support, and renewal of young people with the public meaning of libraries. We can't write another **Catcher in the Rye** and we can't mass-produce safe places.

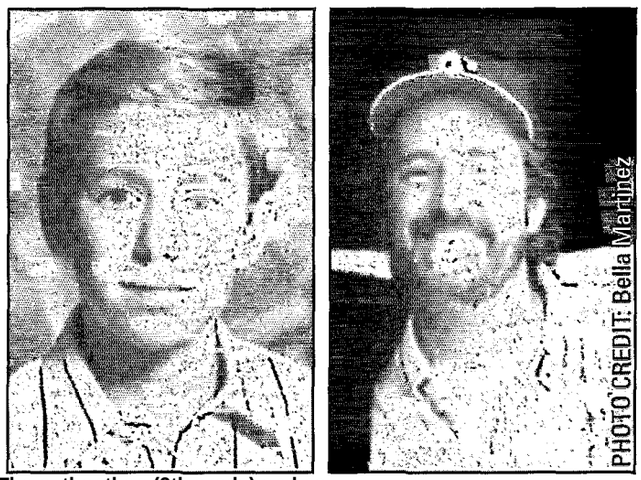
Although libraries should not promote themselves as harbors of institutional protection in the shiny Building-on-the-Hill, there are obviously very positive dimensions to what we offer every day.

And there is always far more that we *could* do. We can work toward insuring, for instance, that all libraries offer caring service for all young people, with adults meeting them more on youth's own terms than on terms rigidly dictated to them. We can reject what I call "The Geography of No," in which libraries enforce anti-youth regulations such as "no sitting two-to-a-computer," "no talking," "no studying or conversing in groups," "no gum-chewing," "no food," "no music," "no computer use without I.D.," etc. Such no's, intentionally or not, are in direct contradiction to how young people really work. Libraries can become enriching environments-atmospheres of joy, entertainment, exploration, skill-building, access to community assets-places in which to promote youth development. Some libraries have begun experimenting with "Teen Spatial Aesthetics" as they redesign specillc areas to entice and excite young patrons.

Strong libraries remain essential features of healthy communities. They stand as one of the few remaining institutions of optimism that older generations leave for the next. We owe strong, proactive, well-funded libraries to young people, not because their streets are sick and dangerous, but because teenagers are citizens of our communities and are *entitled* to them. We owe them strong libraries because they are our young people and we love them. To conflate this function with an illusory goal of safety for funding opportunities, political expediency, or any other reason, actually serves to separate communities from libraries. We're better at building connections.

NOTES

1. Patrick Jones, **New Directions for Library Service to Young Adults,** American Library Association, 2002, 38.
2. Mike A. Males, **Framing Youth: 10 Myths About the Next Generation,** Common Courage Press, 1999. See also M. Berends, A. M. Pallas, & *J.* Z. Spade, *Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools: Issue Sheet* in **Implementing Educational Reform: Sociological Perspectives on Educational Policy,** Ablex, 1996, 82-86); and N. D. Brener, T. R. Simon, E. G. Krug, & R. Lowry, *Recent Trends in Violence-Related Behaviors Among High School Students in the United States,* **Journal of the American Medical Association** 282, August 4, 19991 440-446.



The author then (8th grade) and now.

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