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A Personal Library Story

This time, I am going to tell you a short personal library story, an elevator speech perhaps.

I grew up in a blue collar neighborhood in a busy area of northern New Jersey. Not just blue collar, but somewhat rough too, and not well racially integrated. A neighborhood of two overlapping cultures, mine being first-generation white born-Americans. There was sharing of space, at least at the margin in which I lived, but separation anyway, economically and culturally.

I say rough, because I have, for example: walked by drunks lying curbside (a different way to read "curbside" from books being distributed curbside at the library); passed a man, a body actually, lying on a gully bank, a crap game site, with a weapon left behind, in him actually; witnessed a man beating "his woman," both standing in a pool of blood. It was to be expected in this neighborhood. I was too young, and so what.

I lived among part-time bookies, my father included, until I blew his cover in 4th grade. Thereafter, he just took me, hand in hand, to his favorite bookie joint in the neighborhood to bet. That's my memory of a good father-son relationship, among others like that.

My parents did not have high school degrees. My father never read a book. My mother did, and she got them from a library.

Across the street from where I lived, a little up the block, was a public library branch. A home for a small collection of books and magazines, a Librarian, and not much more. Even today, it seems to me like a little oasis of the streets. It was there for me, too, for me to find Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle (by Betty MacDonald) and, later, books about atoms, electrons and protons. I eventually escaped this Chandler Avenue, and this library was a part of why. I migrated to atoms, electrons and protons.

But still, once, on Halloween night, when in my early teens, I mischievously put used gum in the front door keyhole of this branch library. Trick without treat. Just an unthinking thing that I did because it was Halloween, and we did mischief then for the fun of it. Only a small belligerent act, considering what else. I am ashamed today to say I did that. This is the first that I have spoken about it publicly, but I have often cringed to myself in private. I know that I have incurred a lifetime debt of conscience for that.

These are my remembrances about one branch library across the street in a rough neighborhood, and it is why public libraries matter to me now. That is why I go back to them. That is partly why I am on three library Boards. That is why I do my best to contribute to make them better for others.

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So, the Daily Racing Form is now on-line, and you can legally bet on horses off-track, and numbers. You do not need public libraries or the Magic Library Card to do either. But, the Magic Library Card is your ticket to accessing a countywide book collection and more, either on-site or on-line 24/7, using the Polaris Integrated Library System, and for taking full advantage of programs for all ages (on-line for now), as well as for exploring all the databases in Power Library. Neither the wild-west Internet nor COVID-19 has taken any of that away! If you need help, ask an-eager-to-help staff person, and appreciate! I do.

Charles B. Greenberg,
WLN Board President