JUST ANOTHER DAY AT THE LIBRARY

My name is Martin Sturgis, and I am a reference librarian at the Central branch of the 27-branch Sacramento Public Library system. I just celebrated my 67th birthday. I have been working at Central for twelve years. Previously, I had been a high school English teacher, but I retired from that after thirty years behind the desk back in Indiana. I therefore consider my library work as kind of a “second career.” I work part-time, usually twenty-five hours a week. I still enjoy my job helping people, but some days the work can be rather unusual and unnerving. This is a true story about one of those days.

Sacramento is California’s capitol, and our branch is located downtown. Within walking distance are City Hall, a Federal prison, the County Courthouse, and various churches and museums. There are gleaming skyscrapers and older high-rise businesses, dozens of State office buildings, and various upscale apartments and condominiums. Farther afield, there are tidy, tree-lined residential streets – some with colorful restored Victorian homes from a century or more ago. But we are also close to several run-down urban slum areas and city parks teeming with vagrants, the assorted homeless, and the mentally ill. Often, they wander into our library to sleep, wash themselves and/or their clothing in our bathrooms, or confront startled library patrons with drunken behavior or crazed outbursts. Our official policy is tolerance and non-intervention, unless violence is imminent. But it takes a lot of getting used to when you see it every day.

Among the library staff, we confidentially discuss the disruptive “regulars” and their various behaviors: shave-headed men with neck tattoos who defensively cast their eyes downward and automatically call you “Boss” -- a tip-off that they once did hard time in prison; Stinky Girl, a homeless woman in her late 20’s who reeks of filthy, sour clothing and body odor – made even worse in the scorching, sweaty Sacramento summertime; Crazy Joe, a man in his 40’s who – when off his psychiatric meds – harasses other patrons at the internet computers by yelling, “Stop stalking me!”; an elderly crazy woman who claims that the police tasered her four blocks from the library but that “it was all the library’s fault.”; Mr. Hate, a strange elderly man whom we have caught writing hateful captions in pen under various magazine pictures of any racial minorities; anonymous men of all ages pleasuring themselves in the bathroom or simply urinating on the floor; Backpack Bob, a drifter who comes in everyday with a huge camping backpack and who inevitably falls asleep snoring at a back table in the non-fiction stacks; Doomsday Dan, a bearded, long-haired wild man resembling an Old Testament prophet, who warns anyone who listens that the world is coming to an end any moment; Diaper Lady, who changes her children’s soiled diapers in the library, then shoves the dirty ones behind the book rows on the book shelves; assorted DVD movie disk thieves; and that is just for starters.

Then you have: the unemployed who play video games or on-line poker all day, every day; people who are lonely and want to tell you their troubles in detail, either in person or over the telephone; people who want free medical-financial-legal-shopping-relationship advice; the kids during the summer and/or afterschool who come in to play Minecraft (probably telling their parents that they are “doing their homework at the library”); people who come in looking for a book, but they can’t remember either the title or author ( “All I know is that it had a blue cover…no wait, it was more like dark green…”); people who want you to fix their computer or automotive problems; men trying to sneak a peek at an internet porn site; amorous teens groping (or sometimes even more) in remote book shelf corners; alcohol or tobacco sneak-ins; serial liars claiming routinely that they returned books or other materials, to avoid paying fines or to avoid admitting that they lost an item; and the list goes on.

Nowadays, when a librarian gets a question about an actual book or an author, we in our humble profession breathe a sigh of relief, like a tearful reunion with a long-lost friend. At last, our true training and knowledge base is being recalled and tapped! We bless those who come in with a hefty list of future book holds, or those who want a similar author to the one they finally exhausted, or those who are excited about a great book they just finished (after staying up all hours, needing to know how it ended). These are the book lovers, the literature fiends, the book club afficionados, the dedicated frequent writers of letters of appreciation to authors. More often than not, these patrons are older and well-seasoned, either formally educated or extensively self-taught. Like goers to classical symphonies or opera, however, one wonders with dread if a new generation will replace them once they are gone. Today – for better or worse – libraries are one of the last places left that act as an anchor and community hub, where all are welcomed and interacted with. This of course is a good and needed thing, but our good will “bond” with the public is sadly often abused and degraded by those who flaunt the basic rules of civilized conduct.

My coworkers are mostly young urban hipsters –smart, tech-savvy, and energetic. Many – female and male --sport elaborate tattoos, facial piercings, neon hair colorings, and other trendy adornments. Most live a bicycle ride away from their apartments and lofts in Mid-Town, with its fashionable bars, restaurants, and nightclubs. Our “pages” (our irreplaceable, faithful book shelvers, usually listening to their iPods as they work) are mostly older teenagers working part-time while still going to school. I get a kick out of telling all of our young staffers about libraries back in the day, before computers and Google searches, when a librarian relied solely on the trusty card catalogue, with its non-electronic system of wooden sliding drawers. There are still a few dinosaurs around like me at Central, but most senior librarians are retiring sooner rather than later. We mostly stick together at lunch or in the staff lounge, noting with bemusement how our administrators keep getting get younger and younger. We laugh at how the younger workers have zero recall on classic movies, books, or television shows – or important historical events, for that matter – from the 1950’s-1980’s era. But to be fair, my generation can’t relate to most of the modern popular cultural world of the young either (frankly, most things after the year 2000) -- the major exceptions being both The Beatles and the return of vinyl records on turntables!

Anyway, to proceed with our disturbing true story… One blustery day in December, a young black man in a dark hooded sweatshirt came in to our main floor circulation desk area. He appeared to be badly high on drugs. You know the type – he could have been white, Asian, or Hispanic too -- likely a high school drop-out, unemployed or unemployable, angry, living dangerously on the street. Library protocol would have had him gently escorted out of the building, with the police called only if he tried to enter back in again. But suddenly the young man started screaming incoherent demands of some sort, after which he pulled out a wicked looking steak knife with a six-inch blade from his pants pocket and started to threaten those nearby. People began screaming or quickly ducked out the exit door.

At this time, I was in the reference area on the second floor. Central is designed with a large open atrium looking up and down four levels from the main Circulation Desk to skylights on the roof. After hearing the screams and then moving to view the commotion below me, I quickly sized up the situation. The two young women and two young men staffers at the circ desk below nearest the culprit were frozen and inactive, probably in disbelief. Then I heard the intruder cry out: “I’ll stab the first motherf\*cker that does the wrong thing! I ain’t playin’. I need money. Give it up!” Several panicked patrons laid down on the floor face down, covering their heads with their hands in a gesture of subservience. That was when I pulled out my cellphone and dialed 911. I told the operator the situation and our address. She said help was on the way. I thought with disgust how multiple suggestions at a recent staff meeting about hiring security guards to help offset problems with the homeless and other types of abuse had been nixed by the administrators as “too costly and probably ineffective.”

My mind racing, I thought about the next step of action I could take while we waited for the police to arrive. The hooded man was still screaming threats and brandishing his weapon with real menace. I was positive that he was only moments away from likely doing deadly harm, and probably before police help arrived. I had an idea. The intruder had never looked up in the atrium area, hence he had not seen me on the second level witnessing his actions. Secondly, as luck would have it, he was almost directly below me – a distance of about twenty-five feet. If I could drop something heavy directly down on his head or at least on his hand holding the knife, it might either knock him out or force the weapon out of his hand. He could then be overpowered by either other quick-thinking library staff or brave bystanders. It was worth a try.

The heaviest item that I saw when quickly glancing around my reference area was a huge, unabridged Webster’s Dictionary, which lay opened on its classic wooden stand. This behemoth volume weighed a good ten pounds, maybe even a little more. It would have more than the force of a bowling ball…and if I dropped down from a height of twenty-five feet…

It was worth a chance. The police had not arrived yet, and the situation called for fast action to thwart imminent violence against innocent people, I reasoned. I carefully leaned over the chest-high, second floor safety barrier wall, with my arms extended holding the weighty book. I then positioned myself directly above the attacker’s head and… let the Webster’s fly. As it dropped, I recalled dropping water balloons off a railroad bridge as a boy back in Fort Wayne – the slow-motion falling effect, then the impressive strike…

The massive dictionary hit its intended target. The man in the hoodie was knocked out cold and collapsed to the floor, dropping his knife. Seconds later, the police S.W.A.T. team burst in with weapons drawn. They noticed the attacker was out of action, then looked up at me on the second floor when they figured out what I had done. We exchanged the “thumbs up” sign, and I took the elevator down to greet the cops. After we introduced ourselves, they next called for an ambulance. The attacker was unconscious (my intention was to incapacitate, obviously never to kill), and he had suffered some bleeding from his mouth where he bit the side of his tongue. This occurred because he was still yelling the very instant the dictionary hit his head. He recovered consciousness by the time the paramedics arrived, but was immediately arrested. (In the months that followed, he went to trial and a jury found him guilty. He was sentenced to a maximum of 6-8 years in Folsom, the judge taking into account his several related prior arrests. By the way, the library attacker’s name was Moses Jefferson Lee, age 26.)

The media had a banner day once the story of my “dictionary drop” patron rescue scenario got out. The Sacramento Bee newspaper trumpeted: ”The Pen is Still Mightier Than the Sword -- Words Overcome Armed Library Attacker.” Local television and radio stations interviewed me as “The Hero Librarian.” The story was even picked up on a few national networks. Mayor Kevin Johnson awarded me a commendation plaque at a fancy luncheon with some top police officials and officers. A few weeks after the publicity died down, Central was granted funding for two full-time security guards by the Library Board, while I was given a small hourly pay raise.

Of course, I was just doing my job as I assessed the situation. Any staffer under the same circumstances could have done the same thing that I did. Right place, right time, quick decision, correct action. Simple, really, when you think about it.

After all, it was just another day at the library…

THE END

By Jack Karolewski

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