



I began volunteering at the Madison branch soon after moving to Mississippi four years ago. Before that, I'd worked in two public library systems in the Washington, DC metro area. They were both large and wealthy, and each served many thousands of patrons. I expected things to be very different here but found that the Madison library offered the services of big city systems with a small-town warmth and community focus.

There are books, of course - on the shelf, on CD or cassette tape, and on the Library's website for digital download. There are magazines and computers and printers and copiers and fax machines. There are reading and craft groups, seasonal programs, film screenings, programs for adults, for children, and for special needs groups. In short, I found everything I thought a good public library should offer. Yet as good as these services are, they probably wouldn't account for the smiles I see on the faces of patrons as they come through the door and are greeted by the staff. Sometimes it seems to me everybody in Madison has a friend at this library. That's because our Madison Library thinks big but acts like a neighbor. Everything it does - the materials it buys (books in all their formats, DVDs, databases, computers, etc.) and the programs it offers - is done with a knowledge of the Madison community acquired over many years of listening and serving. The public libraries we have today are one of the greatest legacies of American democracy. In my view they are one of the last, few places that bring our communities together. This is the spirit I see at work at the Madison Library.

But as Joni Mitchell famously warned: "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." There is no law that requires communities to have a library. Many in Mississippi do not. We in Madison County are fortunate to have mayors, county supervisors and - so far - state legislators who understand and support the work of our public libraries. When the financial crisis of 2008 hit, officials across the country decided they had many priorities more important to them than libraries, and so branches were closed, hours reduced and staff and programs eliminated. As a librarian at that time, I saw this firsthand. I discovered then that even in good times, public libraries tend to get the smallest slice of the budgetary pie.

We are so accustomed to having libraries that we assume they'll always be there for us or our children and their children. But we have to remind ourselves that we library users are the "public" in "public library" and have a role in insuring its well-being. Fortunately, nothing could be easier. The way I see it

every library patron is also a library advocate. Everyone who checks out or downloads a book, uses a computer or attends a program is making a statement of support that says "I care about this!"

What more needs to be said? Y'all come!

Phillip Volland
Retired Librarian
Madison, MS