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Librarians don't often get credit they deserve

By LEWIS DIUGUID

Ann Seidl's documentary made me think of all the libraries I've frequented and loved, and the librarians who've helped make them so irreplaceable and welcoming.

But the film also made me realize how right she was: Most people value libraries for what they offer but have little to no regard for the librarians.

"The better we do our jobs, the more invisible we become," said Seidl after a screening of her documentary "The Hollywood Librarian" last month at the Central Library downtown. "The better we do our job, the less respect we get."

Seidl, who has a master of library information services from the University of Denver, did the film to draw attention to the Hollywood image of librarians vs. the real people who keep libraries alive.

The documentary included film clips of librarians from "The Music Man" and "It's a Wonderful Life," which give negative depictions of librarians as shushing, inflexible and unappealing. Seidl said that like teachers, most of the people who study to be librarians are women, and women get stereotyped.

The film showed that some libraries throughout the country are closing because of budget shortfalls. In other cases, people aren't willing to support them with tax dollars. When libraries suffer so does civilization.

The film included footage of libraries being looted in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion of that country in 2003. Priceless books and material were lost.

The documentary showed how librarians have had to defend people's freedoms against Bush-era, civil-liberties-bludgeoning laws, which open people's library records to government snooping. But because of patriotic fervor, librarians have mostly stood alone in the struggle.

"As far as I am concerned, we have never been in a worse situation," Seidl said.

"People believe in the library fairy," Seidl said. They think libraries are "a natural resource like the Grand Canyon. They don't realize we put it there in the first place."

Librarians suffer a huge problem, Seidl said: "We think that because people love the library they love us. That is a bitter, bitter pill to swallow."

Not surprisingly, Seidl said librarians love her film, and the audience of mostly librarians at the downtown library was in that camp.

Seidl made me think of librarians who have influenced me. They include Emily Mogelnicki, my high school librarian. She knew my name and always made me feel welcome. In college Anna Jones at the Ellis Library was tops.

In Kansas City some of my favorites are Mary Roberson at the Westport Branch, Cindy Guylar at the Johnson County Library, and Jean Hendershot with the Mid-Continent Public Library system and Pat Gaunce with the West Wyandotte branch in Kansas City, Kan., before they retired.

Carol Levers is forever helpful at the West Wyandotte and Plaza branches. Such individuals have worked hard to make this area's libraries great community gathering places.

I said during the discussion after the film that librarians need a Carl Sagan-like person who can do for librarians what he did for science — make the profession something everyone should value.

Seidl added: "We don't advertise our value during the course of the transaction. Our skill is invisible."

That has to change before we lose the librarians and the libraries we love.

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