

David Carr

When my family moved from Washington D.C. in 2000, we did, as many people did, feasibility visits on where we might live. Staten Island was cheap, but horrible commute, Brooklyn had its charms, but not many places that we could afford that would accommodate five of us. Astoria seemed good for the adults, not great for the kids, and while Westchester County had its charms, the lack of sidewalks and actual towns left us still searching.

And then we came to Montclair. Midwesterners by birth and nature, the trees, the variety of housing, the schools and the abundant small retail made us feel at home. And then we noticed that there were two libraries, a small branch uptown and a big, fulsome one downtown. As both an amenity and measure of civilization, it sort of sealed the deal.

My daughter Erin, a mad reader and watcher, spent a lot of time at the uptown branch and made liberal use of the drop box out front, although not always in a timely manner. (Sorry about that, library people.)

And on weekend days when we were at loose ends, we would spend time downtown, upstairs and down, in the racks and in the videos. The patience and expertise of the staff and their clear passion for making a third place full of reference and fiction, the useful and the wondrous, made the hours go by quickly and happily.

I was a kid who spent a lot of time in libraries, getting on running tears in reading. The Hardy Boys, S.E. Hinton, and later, the young adult delights of Salinger. I filled my head with words to the point where when they began spilling out of me later as a writer, it seemed very much a natural extension of the time spent pouring over books I had found in the stacks. I am a writer because I was and am a reader.

Many libraries have lost vitality over time, as the Web and its blandishments have sucked away younger users, but I have always noticed when I walk in to ours that all kinds of people – young, old, natty and not – show up and are comfortable there. And Montclair has not run away from the Web, but embraced with a variety of useful databases, information about the best ways to use the collection and tools for booking rooms for groups and events.

Our older girls have grown up and gone to college, but their younger sister did as they did, working her way through books that her mother brought home for her and then, when the time came, checking them out herself. And when she is downtown and has time to kill between the relentless academic, athletic and social schedule that is teen life in Montclair, it is a deep pleasure to get a text that she is at the library. It's not that Starbucks doesn't have value, but there is something about comforting and quietly exciting about having your kid choose to spend her time in a room full of books.

Like all towns in an era of deep financial challenges, Montclair has faced its fiscal challenges. Library hours have been tweaked and other services have been down-sized, but whenever I bring people here, I always make a point of showing them that we have those third places, places where words still rule and the imaginations of the people who work and visit there are free to frolic.

---David Carr is a Reporter and Columnist for The New York Times.