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### The Importance of Volunteers in Pinellas County Libraries

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Celebrating Volunteers in Public Library:  
Comments Delivered at the Annual Volunteer  
Appreciation Luncheon for the Largo Library

Largo Cultural Center, 18 February 1998, 1:00 p.m.

Good afternoon. It is indeed an honor to appear before you--the volunteers, library staff, and City officials--who make Largo Library a wonderful place to visit. Indeed, while any library requires a high level of administrative and community support, as well as a body of dedicated paraprofessionals and professionals in order to serve its constituency successfully, outstanding libraries build upon this solid foundation by recruiting a corps of volunteers that serve in a variety of capacities. I hope that my remarks during the next few moments will reaffirm the important contributions that you--the volunteers at the Largo Library--make for your library, other members of the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative, and the community-at-large.

A few years ago, some people were predicting that public libraries might soon wither away and disappear. Certainly, some people argued, the growing availability of new technologies available at home and the workplace would make the public library--our repository of fiction and cookbooks--obsolete! I often refer to those times as B.C. and B.V.: Before Computers and Before Videos arrived in the library.

Indeed, libraries today are incredibly busy places. The disappearance of the old card catalogs and the transition to new online systems--like SUNLINE--while difficult for some, now allow for patrons to review their patron records, reserve books, and learn--from a comfortable terminal at Largo's Library--what other resources exist at many other locations. This has lead to increased demands for Inter-library loans, as FAX machines and national databases such as FirstSearch are used by librarians to locate and obtain a treasure trove of information from libraries throughout Florida and the United States.

Computers also allow patrons to join the information revolution: whether it is a patron who browses the Infotrac database or goes to the Suncoast Freenet to check electronic messages--e-mail--patrons who visit the library appreciate that they can join the global information revolution in a place that always tried to answer their questions.

Let me briefly describe my observations as a librarian at the Gulf Beaches Library in Madeira Beach. I have worked at Gulf Beaches since last fall, and, it was a homecoming of sorts. A St. Petersburg native, I grew up on Redington Beach. I have many, many memories of going to the Gulf Beaches Library as a child with science projects and book reports--and later as a college student who wanted a nearby place to study or do research--when a long

drive to Tampa was out of the question.

Today, from the other side of the Information Desk, I have witnessed an incredible transformation at MY library: the on-line catalog allows patrons who would have previously looked endlessly for the latest John Grisham book--or whatever title Oprah mentioned on her show--to quickly and painlessly reserve the material by calling or visiting us. Likewise, the arrival of the Internet has dramatically changed our small library. We now have a three-week waiting list for our Internet tutorials--it is very encouraging to see a number of our residents--especially senior citizens--make the transition to the cyber world. A majority of my students in these Internet training classes are seniors who want to send e-mail, track their stock portfolios, and examine investment opportunities. And we, as the volunteers and staff at their neighborhood public library, are proud to meet their needs.

Oh, did I say something about videos? Audio-visual materials are an important part of a library's collection. It is not uncommon for a single videocassette to circulate over 100--even 200--times during its shelf life. The arrival of videos, music CDs, and other multi-media materials demonstrates that we in the public library continue to meet the demands of our constituency. And, the last time I checked our statistics, the circulation of good, old-fashioned books was on the increase as well, vindicating my belief

that libraries are here to stay!

Why do I mention all of this? Well, with libraries experiencing such frenzied activity, we must remember the role that each of us plays in making our library a shining star in the community. You see, while personnel manuals and job descriptions very carefully decide the drawing line between who carries the title LIBRARIAN and who serves as a LIBRARY ASSISTANT with precise phrases such as "must have an ALA-accredited master's degree," to members of the general public, when they walk into the door, the first person they meet is a "librarian." I have never had a patron ask me whether or not I have an "ALA-accredited master's degree." But I have had them ask me a variety of directory, circulation, information, and reference questions--and I have dilligently attempted to answer the questions to the best of my ability.

As do you! When you made a commitment to volunteer at the Largo Library, you agreed to give your time and creative labors to a busy institution that is a focal point of the community. To John Q. Public and Jane Doe as they walk in the door, your cheerful smile, your pleasant greeting, and your desire to make their visit a pleasant experience makes you a true librarian in their eyes, as well as in mine. Successful libraries--such as Largo's--are busy places that reward volunteers and staff alike, and places that nuture bonds between these groups.

When I attended library school at the University of South Florida, I was exposed to a lot of acronyms and catchy phrases such as AACR-2, HTML, Z39.5, and OCLC. But what really matters--and it is something that you cannot get out of a college textbook--is the importance of customer service: you, as volunteers at the Largo Library, are also important ambassadors to the community. Whether you assist at the checkout desk, by reshelving books, or by providing assistance in the library's fantastic genealogy collection, your emphasis on serving our patrons is commendable.

Over the past few minutes, I have talked about the important roles that you--as volunteers at the Largo Library--play for people who visit this fine facility. You play an ever-important role as the face of public libraries continues to change. When I was a child, if it wasn't in my nearby library, I was convinced that it couldn't possibly exist. With the advent of the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative, my hometown library card is my passport to public libraries throughout Pinellas, Pasco, and Hillsborough counties. In the near future, with the growing importance of distance learning, public libraries may soon find themselves sharing a greater burden of the responsibilities of assisting college and university students who attend classes--or gather resources--far from their home campuses.

YOU, the volunteers, have been there to usher the Largo Library

through the dramatic changes that have taken place throughout the past, and I, as a librarian and as a citizen who relies upon your camaraderie and assistance, hope that you will continue to be there in the future.

Thank you for allowing me to speak at this special occasion today. I have enjoyed sharing my passion for our public libraries with such a distinguished body.