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<div align="center">The Persistence of Books: Why Libraries Matter Today</div>

I loved going to the library when I was younger. I remember excitedly going into the children's section and picking out books that seemed interesting, books that I wanted to read. After getting home, I would spend hours just reading these books, mostly fiction of various sorts, that I got to borrow for free. As I got older, I stopped using the library as much, and moved on to getting books that we had just lying around the house, on one of our 17 bookshelves, which contain thousands of books in total. A love of books and reading was definitely a strong influence on my childhood.

Books are, and for a long time have been, important sources of enjoyment for children and adults alike, and libraries are an important provider of books, allowing people to get books for free and return them when finished reading, so others can enjoy the same physical book. Yet, as technology advances, libraries are more important than ever, giving the public access to print books as well as a variety of digital services.

Digital services are a strong part of what is pulling libraries into the 21st century, and making sure that they stay relevant. According to Chris Willrich, a local author, librarian, and book aficionado, the library offers, in addition to physical services, access to a variety of electronic databases, which are a good resource for research, and ebooks, for the e-reading experience of ever-increasing popularity. While these resources can be acquired from other

locations, the library is one of the very few places where they can be reliably obtained for free. This is more important now than ever, as author Neil Gaiman argues, "In the last few years, we've moved from an information-scarce economy to one driven by an information glut". Without these more modern tools to navigate the increasing amount of data that is put out each day, libraries would be extremely hindered in their ability to be a good and reliable information source for research, which is one of the main services libraries offer. A study by the American Library Association found that "71% of the respondents reported using one or more kinds of new media in their programming for young children. Some 58% of libraries plan to increase new media availability in programs and services for youth" ("Issues and Trends"). Today's youth need to know more than anybody else how to use digital media, especially in research contexts.

Another extremely important digital service that libraries provide is free internet access. While this may not seem like much, Gaiman makes note that it is "hugely important when the way you find out about jobs, apply for jobs or apply for benefits is increasingly migrating exclusively online". This is just the tip of the iceberg for exclusively online services, but is arguably the most important, as not being able to secure a job is essentially the fast lane to poverty and homlessness (at least in the US). Without the internet access that libraries provide, a large number of individuals would find it much harder to get a job, making it clear how this specific service is vitally important. It can also be used as a way for those without internet access to connect with the world, increasing their awareness of what is going on in the world around them.

Even though they provide important access to digital communities, libraries are also important physical community centers. The library is, and always has been, a place where

people can gather to work together on something, and a place where children can learn to love to read. Willrich, who works at the Mountain View Public Library, explains: "One of the other things we do is to provide a location for meetings and community events. Sometimes these are organized by people outside the library but we have a lot of events that are library originated. In the children's section … [t]here are two different bilingual story times: English/Spanish and English/Mandarin." The bilingual storytimes offer support for children in non-native-English-speaking families, allowing them to learn English more easily than without.

The librarians themselves, who are an integral part of the library's functioning, play another important role in being supportive of the community. According to Theresa Quill, a research librarian at Indiana University, "Most librarians get into it because they like working with people and helping people, and I think that fosters the sense of community and collaboration" (Green). The importance of librarians in the strengthening of community stems from their willingness to help people, which seems to be part of why they take the job. Gaiman backs this claim up by relating an experience from his childhood, where the librarians treated him with respect as just another reader, despite his being only 8 years old. Librarians' love of their work fosters a constructive environment where people can read whatever they want to, and receive help with finding what to read.

Additionally, the timeless value of libraries is exemplified by fiction, which is responsible for many people, including myself, loving to read. As Gaiman elegantly put it in his speech, "Fiction has two uses. Firstly, it's a gateway drug to reading. The drive to know what happens next, to want to turn the page, the need to keep going, even if it's hard, because someone's in trouble and you have to know how it's all going to end … that's a very real drive.

And it forces you to learn new words, to think new thoughts, to keep going. To discover that

reading per se is pleasurable" (Gaiman). Libraries offer almost unlimited access to fiction,

which is an enormous asset in learning a lifelong love of reading, and a great way to think about

other worlds. The text-only format of books leaves a lot more up to imagination, so reading

fiction exercises the mind by leaving us to imagine what the events in the book look like, adding

another layer of engagement. Fiction is one keystone in why libraries have always been

important, letting children learn reading skills that they will use all throughout their lives, and

providing entertainment for adults as well.

Even though libraries are transitioning to include more digital content, which they will

continue doing far into the future as new forms of material are released, the physical collection is

still a vital part in their importance. The mere fact that the books are physical objects can be a

positive feature: "Physical books are tough, hard to destroy, bath-resistant, solar-operated, feel

good in your hand: they are good at being books…" (Gaiman). While physical books are

inherently resilient, electronic devices can be resilient as well, through effort. However, physical

books have more advantages that electronic devices simply cannot replicate. Willrich explains,

"books as just physical artifacts are [a] really durable kind of technology, they don't require

external power sources. If you know the language that they're written in and can see it then …

you're able to access the material in it without any special help … Eventually a book can get

damaged and become unreadable but they hold up pretty well, they're also not dependent on any

particular software or the operating system there won't be any changes in technology that will

invalidate a book." Books have the remarkable ability to persist through much longer periods of

time than electronic media much more easily. A book written and published in the 1920's can

easily be in very good shape today, still as readable and understandable as when it was first written, also giving a glimpse into the past in the process.

Libraries have been around for thousands upon thousands of years, dating back to some of the earliest civilizations. The physical objects used to write upon have changed much over the years, from clay tablets to scrolls, and eventually books, but the idea remains the same: a collection of written text for the public to enjoy and learn from. While modern libraries expand upon this base idea with modern services, they are, at their core, still the same. Most famous among ancient libraries was Egypt's Library of Alexandria, holding countless scrolls of knowledge, and serving as a place of study. If having a large collection of physical books is not the way to go, why would have the destruction of the Library of Alexandria be considered such a disaster as it is? Libraries are extremely old, and have remained relevant through the millennia for a reason.

It can be argued that the modern world needs to progress, and books may become irrelevant if technology advances enough. While books are important to have as an alternative for reasons mentioned earlier, they also serve a group that electronic devices cannot reasonably do: very young children. Reading to toddlers is an important practice in developing childrens' brains, and with the way toddlers are, needing to interact with the world around them and having little fine control, electronic devices might simply be too fragile for their purposes. Board books are designed to be the ideal form of media for very young children, since they can withstand a lot of abuse, up to and including being chewed on. The simple act of flipping the pages can also serve as a way to gain fine-motor control, a very important skill if the child is going to use electronic devices. Electronic media cannot fully replace books, and is much more short-lived,

so while libraries need to include digital content to not fall behind in our interconnected digital world, the physical collection is still as important as it ever was.

Libraries serve many important purposes in our communities, from acting as a community center to helping in the development of young children. They need to adapt to the times by including digital content, as they have been, but the physical collection remains relevant. Above all, as Gaiman notes, "[L]ibraries are about freedom. Freedom to read, freedom of ideas, freedom of communication. They are about education (which is not a process that finishes the day we leave school or university), about entertainment, about making safe spaces, and about access to information." Libraries empower the entire community, from young children to seniors, from job hunters to fiction lovers. These beacons of information and freedom are an important part of our society, and will continue to be for as long as our civilization exists.