



Interview at Long Beach Public Library

“There are students who come in and try and do their work, people applying for jobs, people looking for housing, and homeless people who are just looking to connect.”

Library volunteer John Arcos talks with his daughter, Allison Arcos, about his involvement with the library and explains how he uses his acquired set of skills to help support the library’s recognition of the “digital divide,” an uneven distribution of access to information and communication technology in communities.

John: Looking back on things a couple of years ago, it occurred to me that I had all this sort of technology wisdom.

Allison: Mhmm.

John: And I thought just retiring and going home at the end of the day was sort of a waste of what I had picked up, and so I went down to the library to see, you know, what do they do?

Allison: Mhmm.

John: It turned out that they have, they support, what’s called “the digital divide,” and what that is, is a recognition that not everybody has access to the internet. Not everybody has access to a computer at home. And so, the libraries provide workstations for people who don’t have those kind of accesses to come in to use them. So, at the main public library there’s 35 workstations and at any given time, they may be full with 35 people who are using the computers and accessing the internet to do their homework and apply for jobs.

Allison: Mhmm.

John: And generally speaking, because the use of those capabilities is not particularly intuitive, somebody needs to be around to help everybody through whatever particular problem they’re

having. That seemed to be a pretty good fit. I said, "Oh, I can do that." People will come in, not quite understand how to use Microsoft Office.

Allison: Mhmm.

John: Or have trouble running a spreadsheet or whatever. And so, it's pretty interesting because it's a pretty broad range of expertise you have to have at your fingertips. So, it's definitely not boring.

Allison: Talk to me a little bit about the population that uses the workstations at the library that you've interacted with.

John: Well, it really runs the gamut. The library is right next to City Hall. So, occasionally, you'll have people that just need something done. And sometimes it just fills in for professional people who need the capability. Then there's students that come in and try and do their work, there are people applying for jobs, there's people looking for housing, and there's homeless people that just are looking to connect.

Allison: Talk to me a little bit about the flash drives and the reading glasses.

John: Oh, yeah. Just being at the library, I noticed a couple of places where there were things that people needed, and they didn't seem to be readily available. And actually, the two things there were earphones and reading glasses. People would come in and want to watch a movie, and we somewhat frown on that because if you don't have earphones, then all your neighbors are going to hear the movie just as well, so we ask people to wear earphones and oftentimes, they don't have them. And we had very few earphones available for loan, so I try to keep the library supplied in...

Allison: Mhmm.

John: ...give away earphones. The same thing with reading glasses. We had a lady come in who was hoping to apply for the Section 8 housing. So, she asks for a list of available housing that complied with the Section 8 rules, so I printed off the list and gave it to her and looked around, and she's holding the paper up, about an inch from her nose to try to read it. There was a bit of an "ah-ha" there, that "oh, there's a need for reading glasses," so I try to keep the library in reading glasses, as well.

Allison: You're a good dad. [Laughter]

John: Aw, shucks.