

Your Community Library - A Place of Refuge

SJI Library

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The Library recently received a "True Grit" award from the San Juan Island Chamber of Commerce for "working diligently to overcome a community challenge." We all know what that challenge in November was, right?

We may feel as though we're living a life apart here on the island, away from the stress and hubbub of crowded cities, but cut off from our electronic communication with the rest of the world, we realized just how interconnected we are.

The Library was busier that first day when no one knew what had actually occurred, and we all assumed the outage would be fixed within a few hours, or a day at most. We alerted the San Juan Islander, San Juan Island Update and The Journal of the San Juan Islands over the week that the Library still had Internet and free WiFi, and they got the word out.

The first real ramifications of the outage hit me when a patron came in that first evening flustered because she could not contact her brother who calls her every night to check in on her. She knew he would be frantic if he couldn't reach her. After brainstorming, someone suggested she email someone else off-island who could call her brother for her.

We also had a similar situation in reverse - a daughter worried because she couldn't call her mother off-island to check on her, as she did every evening. These were not isolated incidents.



The next day things really started hopping. Residents from the island lined up well before opening time, relieved to see the sign on the door saying the Library still had Internet and free WiFi.

All library computers were filled with patrons by 10:02 am after opening at 10:00 am, with at least 20 others hauling their own laptops. The phones rang almost solidly for one hour with inquiries about Internet availability at the Library.

As the chairs and tables quickly filled, it started to feel like a neighborhood social—greetings, catching up, asking others if they needed help, and speculation about what had happened. We heard many comments

such as, "The party's at the Library!" and "The Library is the hub of the community today," and "[The Library's] the best ticket in town."

We also realized we were seeing a lot people we didn't normally see in the library. We issued many new library accounts. New and returning patrons checked out library materials to take home with them. It was really heartening to see that regular library users and non-users alike knew the Library was a place to come to in a time of crisis.

The next day, as patrons gathered out front before the Library opened, I heard many of them exchanging stories about what they needed to do at the Library that day.

One said that he had a business to run, and needed access to the Internet to do that. Another needed to make payroll for his employees. Two patrons were using Skype in the parking lot, one in the car, and the other using the same car's roof as a desk for his laptop.

Later, one woman who would normally have used her cell phone to arrange a ride for her son to soccer used the Library's landline. Another needed our phone to find a babysitter. Several needed to print shipping labels and airline boarding passes.

The next day we set up extra chairs, tables, and electrical outlets, and still every chair filled, the study room was used by multiple users at a time, and people even sat on the floor. The front desk, usually handled by one or two staff members or volunteers at a time, frequently had three or four people helping patrons at the same time throughout the day.

All this extra traffic required more from all of our staff. Our technology specialist was kept extremely busy tweaking our computer system to handle the increased demand on Library resources.

Eventually things returned to normal. But we saw what did happen, what could happen, and what should happen, and this will inform many of our future infrastructure decisions.

Some takeaways? During the week of the outage we had over 3,400 visitors, more than twice the 1,600 visitors we had the same week in 2012. The Friends of the Library also received some extra generous donations from people who found the resources they needed that week at the Library. We thank those people.

As the Library's new director, I am grateful for decisions made by past library directors, staff, and trustees that enabled us to have the infrastructure in place to be a place of refuge for our community. I'm grateful for a willing, cheerful staff who worked extremely hard to serve over twice our usual capacity.

Our "True Grit" award was written for the "San Juan Island Community Library," which is not our actual name. But I'll take it! I like that emphasis on "community" because that is what we strive to be—a resource, a refuge, and a place to connect for our entire community.

The San Juan Island Library is proud to be a strong member of the San Juan Chamber of Commerce and a vital part of this community.

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