

Hangin' in the stacks / Teens make themselves at home as libraries seek to provide modern conveniences

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Sixteen-year-old **Patrick Green's favorite place** in Atlantic City this summer is:

- A) The beach
- B) The boardwalk
- C) The library

Here's a clue:

"If it didn't close, I'd never leave," said Green, who had just finished a drawing workshop at the Atlantic City Public Library.

"I'd sleep here," added 10-year-old Nazifa Chowdhury, whose family owns a nearby store.

Children's librarian Maureen Moffit knows the pair well. They are part of a contingent of pre-teens and teenagers who have spent most of their summer at the library. They read, use the computers and have been drafted to assist with summer programs and decorate for special events.

"You have to keep them busy, give them something to channel their energy," said Moffit, who with young-adult librarian Jennifer Boyce has improvised such ideas as an "adopt a shelf" program for the group.

The prospect of young adults hanging out at the public library is a trend librarians have greeted with enthusiasm and caution. Particularly in urban centers, the library has taken on an expanded role that mixes equal parts school, home and entertainment center.

Danielle Milam, vice president of programming for the Chicago-based Urban Libraries Council, said libraries began noticing renewed interest by teens as they began adding computers and Internet access -- something many urban students did not have at home.

"We've always had adults and families with small children," Milam said. "But now we're bringing back an audience we had lost."

Groups such as the Wallace Foundation have helped fund social initiatives to reconnect young adults with the library.

For city kids with working parents, the library can be urban summer camp, offering a place that is safe, free, air-conditioned and stocked with a wide array of books, movies, music and computers.

Even those who have computers and movies at home, such as Rachel Campodonico, 12, of Vineland, say the local library offers a welcome alternative to being home alone.

"I get bored at home," she said, a library copy of Harry Potter's latest adventure by her side. "My parents like it that I come here."

A half-dozen student regulars at the Atlantic City library talked over each other as they explained what keeps them coming back.

Michael Vanzant, 12, likes to draw. Charmaine Cason, 11, likes the mystery book club.

"And we help people," Cason added.

Last week they inflated props for the upcoming library luau.

"The beach gets boring," said Ahniyah Upshaw Bethea, 12.

While they welcome the interest, librarians also are aware of the increased responsibility. Some have their own security or arrange regular police patrols to make sure large groups don't get too unruly.

They welcome young adults and provide general supervision but stress they are not a personal babysitting service. Most require parental supervision for children as old as 9 or 10.

"The library is a safe place for kids, especially from troubled families or neighborhoods," Milam said. "But at the same time, it is a public place. It can't be somewhere parents just park the kids for the day. We have to make it work for the kids and all the other patrons."

Vineland addressed the issue by creating a teen room. Open from 2 to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday, it has banks of computers, tables and chairs and is next to the snack area and vending machines.

Vineland children's librarian Helen Cowan Margiotti said that during the school year, an average of 50 students come each day. During the summer, attendance drops a bit to 20 or 30 students per day.

One of them is Israel "Izzy" Morales, 17, who discovered the room through friends last year when he moved to Vineland. He checks his MySpace Web page, listens to music videos and reads books about the Titanic.

"It's a place I can go to relax, see friends, escape family issues," he said. "The staff is nice, they make it comfortable. There is always something interesting here, and it's free. It's like a home away from home."

Inside the teen room, students listen to iPods and play video games. The library sponsored a gaming tournament, and students made a movie.

"They can play their music and talk and not bother anyone else," library assistant Kelly Stites said.

Milam believes one of the attractions for young adults is that the library offers the freedom to do what they are interested in, not just what teachers or parents expect them to do. It's a place where they can be themselves or learn something new.

"We value free choice, free time and self-motivated learning, and often there is not much of that in a teen's life," Milam said.

Moffit agrees, saying she has watched how even the most sullen, surly teens change when they find something they are interested in. She tells the story of the two boys she caught fighting, and when she questioned them, discovered they were just bored. She knew one liked magic, so she found them a book of magic tricks.

"They spent the entire afternoon with that book and at the end of the day showed me a trick," she said.

The trick for the staff is channeling that interest into lifelong skills while giving the children some control and not judging their choices. Moffit said just having a library card gives a child a sense of community, ownership and power.

"It may be the only thing they have that is in their name," she said.

The children say the library is just fun.

"I think the library really gets overlooked," said Nicole Heosto, 13, whose mother works at the Atlantic City library.

"Yeah," Upshaw Bethea added. "Some people say going to the library is whack. But they've never been here."

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