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ASK A LIBRARIAN; Info overload keeps library 'Pod' in business

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HIGHLIGHT: Virtual Reference queries --- routine or unusual --- all answered.

It was a few days before Thanksgiving, so that question about driving from Atlanta to Sarasota, Fla., didn't seem so odd.

Neither, once you thought about it, did an urgent request for a black bean soup recipe. (Guess who's unexpectedly coming to dinner and not eating turkey.) Same for that plea for help finding a copy of "French for Dummies." ("Passez moi le green bean casserole?")

But why on earth did someone want to know who'd had a particular phone number between 1960 and 1965?

"We never ask why," said Douglas McCown, coordinator of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library's (AFPL) Virtual Reference "Pod," located in the Central Library on downtown's Margaret Mitchell Square. "We don't want to know."

They just want to answer questions. All day, every day, whenever the library is open. Questions that flow in by phone, fax, mail (email and snail mail), and via online chat. Questions you'd think no one would need help answering anymore, now that everything's on the Internet. But that's just it. Everything's on the Internet now.

Who better than a friendly librarian to cut through the fodder and walk folks through the more commonly posed questions, like how do you pay a fine, download an e-book or apply for food stamps online? And the less commonly posed ones that periodically have come through the pod: "What was Jesus wearing during the Sermon on the Mount?" "How do you set a human trap?"

Every major metro Atlanta library system offers some version of the reference line. But probably none is as comprehensive as AFPL's, where a rotating crew of librarians, primarily drawn from the Ivan Allen Jr. Reference Department, answered nearly 27,000 questions last year. The dedicated area where they work on the seventh floor feels both cutting-edge and a comforting throwback to an era when the kindly librarian was just a phone call away to help with homework, settle trivia disputes and even put up with occasional smart-alecky questions.

Like this one: With modern technology putting all sorts of information at everyone's fingertips now, shouldn't the library reference line be about as passe as, well, a circa-1960 landline phone number?

"I think it's needed as much as ever," said librarian Betty Moore, in between fielding questions about where to take classes on the Affordable Care Act and how to get to downtown Atlanta from I-75. "If you're out someplace and you don't know what's what, you call us."

Talk about an unexpected turn of the page! It was a little over a decade ago that the only question seemed to be when, not if reference lines would pass into extinction along with --- shudder! --- physical books and the libraries housing them.

"In 2001, there was this big article in the Chronicle of Higher Education about how libraries were deserted and no one was using them anymore," recalled Laura Saunders, an assistant professor at Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science. "We saw this as the peak of the crisis, when everyone was going online."

Calls to reference lines dropped significantly, as more people realized they could conduct their own searches for the capital of Botswana or Millard Fillmore's birth date. Soon, though, the ever-growing information monster began turning on those very people who'd helped create it.

"People realized that as much as they liked having access to so much information, it's overwhelming --- especially when it comes to something small and obscure, or something without a single fixed answer," said Saunders, who teaches reference librarianship. "It wasn't that they didn't need help with questions anymore. There were different types of questions they needed help with."

At Cobb County's Charles D. Switzer Public Library, that frequently means helping computer neophytes upload resumes or take online courses.

But its reference librarians are just as busy now with phone calls, emails and in-person questions from people who are allegedly Web-savvy --- students writing research papers, consumers buying cars, amateur genealogists chasing potential new branches of the family tree --- yet who are drowning in all the information (and misinformation) that's available online. What's more, they may not know that the one thing they're looking for exists only in an obscure book or long-out-of-print periodical the librarians can put their hands on.

"It's almost like they need navigators," said Cynthia Holmberg, the reference librarian who heads the computer help desk at Switzer, headquarters of the 17-branch system in Marietta. "There's all this information out there, and it's like we're their guide."

Back at AFPL's Virtual Reference Pod, the "guides" are fluent in the latest websites and the mustiest old clip files. Once a phone number in the 1946 Atlanta White Pages designated for "Reference Questions Only," now the operation comprises four workstations where librarians move seamlessly (and sometimes simultaneously) between technologies and subject matter.

"OK, 'My daughter is doing a project on bears,' " librarian Kathy Piselli read aloud from a live chat query that had popped up on her screen. Before that, she'd found a good source of free product reviews for a woman who wanted to buy a top-loading washing machine.

They don't make product recommendations, dispense financial tips or provide legal or medical advice, McCown said. Nor do they pry into someone's motives for wanting to know something.

"We're obligated to report an ongoing crime, but otherwise, we don't judge," McCown said. "It's a matter of professional ethics. People have to feel safe calling the library and asking a question."

Yet for all its high-tech capabilities, you still can't beat some of the pod's low-tech resources. Card catalogs and file folders are precious stores of answers compiled over the years to topics that come up regularly: "Serenity Prayer." "Time --- Aboard Ship." "Names of Santa's Reindeer" (including documentation attesting to the fact that "Donner" was originally called "Donder"). And they contain answers to questions that come up way more often than you'd think: "Words Ending in 'gry'." "Accent 'Grave' vs. Accent 'Aigu.'" "Vampires, Werewolf --- Possible Medical Cause."

Downstairs in the library's Special Collections department, card catalogs of old Atlanta Constitution headlines are organized by subject --- handy for when someone contacts them and "wonders if there's an article about a crime or a person they think they remember," McCown said.

Not every question can be answered. "Someone wanted to know the 'real' image of the devil," recalled Linda Jordan, manager of the reference and general collections departments. Another, which has stuck with McCown: "Do you have audio files of Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address?"

But maybe not every question should be answered. Longtime reference librarian Jenifer Frankiewicz once handled a prison inmate's request for information on jujitsu "death" moves.

"I figured he could only use it on his cell(mate)," Frankiewicz said with a wry smile. "I couldn't give it to him."

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The Virtual Reference "Pod" is staffed during the Central Library business hours: 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2-6 p.m. Sundays.

By phone: 404-730-4636; for live online help/chats: go to afpls.org and click the "Ask a Librarian!" link on the left side of the home page. Chat users who send queries outside of the hours of operation can leave a message that will be seen the next day.

You can also email a question to referenceline@fultoncountygga.gov; send it by fax to 404-730-1989, or by U.S. mail to Ivan Allen Jr. Reference Department, Central Library, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System, One Margaret Mitchell Square, Atlanta, GA 30303.

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