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The 100th

Today marks the 100th article of The Magic Library Card! series published in this newspaper. Upon getting the series started on August 5, 2020, I had meant it to become a regular voice for Library Directors in the WLN, a placeholder for what they or staff needed or yearned to write. Things have not worked out quite that way. Maybe Directors are shy after all, or more likely just too busy. I know them to be very, very busy people, who are after all running corporations. Most of the articles, 90% or so, therefore, have been about what I have wanted to write, by default, and of somewhat different perspective.

Except for those few others who have contributed pieces now and then, and with my deepest appreciation, the articles have become my own short weekly essays, always about Libraries though in some way. It is subject matter that you the reader might not have imagined could be so variegated, complex, and integrated into so much that matters in life.

I have told you a lot about Thomas Jefferson, in part through the stories of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803-06. In doing so, I have written about Jefferson's incomparable intellect and reading habits, about the equally incomparable Monticello Library on which he depended; his approximately 6500 book collection ended up seeding the Library of Congress. I quoted this important line from Jefferson more than once: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy."

Current events in America and Europe are a reminder of the truth of that last line in ways and purposes that we might have wished had passed with history. Purposeful and believed lies are now bandied about as the currency of so-called political "truths." Libraries, as Jefferson taught us in defense against that disgraceful and immoral practice, are about building literacy in the most meaningful ways, in ways that help build critical thinking, in ways that inform the citizenry, and in ways, therefore, that nurture that dynamic democracy of which Jefferson spoke. In ways that help us know Truth.

It is Jefferson and his Monticello Library to which I go back now in particular, above reminding you about all the other truly valued, previously mentioned community services and entertainments of a Library. I do so because my purpose has always been mainly to help us all know the Library as more than just a community turnstile for books. Certainly, as a place of underlying kindness, comfort, and inclusion for starters.

Each Library, no matter whether it is the Carnegie Public Library of Pittsburgh or the small-town Murrysville Community Library, is preeminently a cherished center of literacy, in the broadest sense. It is a collective benefit for patrons of all ages, and it offers the capacity to learn to meet Thomas Jefferson at least part way. And that is saying a lot.

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Thank you to the Penn-Franklin News for a free hand to write these essays. Thank you all as readers for walking this path with me for the first two years. Your periodic goodly comments have kept this going. And thank you to my two unnamed literary reviewers for keeping me somewhat straight along the way.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation