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Listening Post: Columbia Public Library

On an icy, dark Sunday afternoon, the glow from the lights inside the Columbia Public Library does not amount to the actual brightness inside from its visitors. As I stepped into this unfamiliar place Feb. 10, the large, grey lobby welcomed me with tall ceilings and few visitors checking out books. Little did I know, I was walking into the belly of the beast, and the farther back I went, the greater its stomach rumbled.

My shyness was obvious as I avoided speaking to a helper and wandered deeper through the library. I felt very uncomfortable and out of place as I sat down at one of the small, rectangular tables in the middle of the chaos that was the children's section. Around 3 p.m., the library was decently busy with kids. Some were toddlers, still adjusting to their surroundings. Others were in elementary school, confident and not dependent on their guardians to help them.

Two girls sat on computers next to each other while they searched for books. I was impressed with their skills as they easily maneuvered the library website. "Ally!" one called out. "I'm going up to the front to ask." Ally's sister didn't know where to look for her book, so she scurried to the help desk without fear. It resonated with me that these girls were self-aware enough to try something on their own and then ask for help when they needed it.

The children's section had a variety of activities from computer games, to coloring books, to a play area. As one hour passed, it became a packed hub of the library. I could hear the crashes of chess pieces falling, kids running around, parents scolding, babies crying and siblings calling out to one another.

I noticed guardians of all kinds including moms, dads, tutors and babysitters. Families of different ethnicities used the area and spoke foreign languages. Kids from different backgrounds who did not know each other still played games together. This section in the library served as a space for all walks of life to learn to interact with one another despite their differences.

As I sat quietly and looked around, an 8-year-old boy made eye contact with me and said "hello" as he passed. I smiled and said "hi" as he retreated back to his mom. The boy's friendliness drew me to his family. It took me awhile to work up the courage to go speak to his mom. As it turned out, his mom, Stephanie, was very friendly and willing to have a conversation with me.

She described her kids as "bookworms" who enjoy reading and come to the library often. When I asked her daughter Emily what her favorite thing about the library was, she quickly responded, "all of the books!" This stuck with me because I was surprised by her interest in books despite today's intriguing, easy access to television, tablets, iPhones and other electronics.

I have always assumed that kids today are engulfed in electronics at a much younger age than in years past. Before this experience, I wondered if they still enjoyed playing and learning without

the comfort of an electronic. Much to my surprise, plenty of kids were reading of books and avoiding screen time.

In terms of advertising, I learned that appealing to kids' interests has changed. I shouldn't assume that every kid wants to stay inside and watch screens all day. I realized there are many kids out there like Stephanie's who enjoy the peace and reality that comes with reading a hard-copy book.

As a parent, Stephanie seems very involved in her kids' learning. She brings them to the library often to help them with school assignments, research and to bump up their reading levels. She was actively looking for new books for her kids to read.

I realized that all parents are not one in the same. Each parent holds different values and has different reasons for going places and using brands. Coming to the library is one of these. While some parents may be invested in helping their kids learn, others are looking for a peaceful break and want to diverge their kid's attention away from them. Some moms would sit in comfy chairs from a distance, looking up every once in a while to check on their child. Other parents, like Stephanie, were there to exercise their role in stimulating their child's learning.

I was interested in coming to this community gathering place because I knew it would be out of my comfort zone. Growing up, I never babysat because those needing help chose my sister Gabby, the older and more qualified contestant. As a child, I was outgoing and always looking to

have fun with my older role models. Now that I am 20 years old, my experience with babies, pre-teens and everything in between has been non-existent.

I've always felt uncomfortable and unprepared around kids because I never know what to say to them or do with them. Observing kids and parents in the bustling children's section allowed me to see that kids are usually willing to chat and interact with all kinds of people.

I feel better prepared for my role in Strategic Communication because I have educated myself firsthand on the Columbia community of kids and parents. I have seen the trends of why they use the library and how they value its educational and social benefits. This is important to take into consideration when thinking of possible ways I can advertise the library to this community.

Furthermore, I learned that I should not underestimate kids. It's a lot easier to make connections with them than I thought. Many of the kids there were a lot smarter and more capable of doing things than I assumed. I see now that kids do value the relationships they make with older people. I have learned that those interactions are better for them, and for myself as an individual and a communicator.



After looking for new books to read, 6-year-old Emily (right) researches with her mom Stephanie (left) for her school project on presidents, Sunday, Feb. 10 at the Columbia Public Library. Emily chose President Harry S. Truman for her project because Truman the Tiger was named after him. Emily said she enjoyed coming to the library because it is quiet and easy to focus.