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Young adults, rituals, and library space

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Young Adults, Libraries, and Ritual Space

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Editor's Note: This unique perspective on what a library space can represent for teenagers is an unusual use of our YA Spaces spot in this first VOYA issue of the millennium. It reports a project that captures time. May it spark your own ideas about how to make young adults an integral part of your library. To submit your splendid YA library spaces, request our YA Spaces questionnaire through voya@voya.com, fax (301) 459-2118, or phone toll-free (888) 4 VOYA 97.

Jerry, Bill, and I were fourteen when we punctured our right thumbs and rubbed our bloods together. In that smelly, old, abandoned garage-cum-clubhouse, we became larger than our individual selves. We became immortal brothers. But we were also mixing with a long legacy of youth rituals. From not stepping on the cracks (to "save our mothers' backs") through the more problematic fraternity and sorority hazings, young people have continually invented ritual to order their universe and to make it more their own. Libraries could learn something here.

At the end of the school year, my branch of the Los Angeles Public Library staged our own ritual: we embedded Central High School's time capsule project in the building itself, vowing to return ten years hence to recover the treasure and to see how we had weathered.

For many youth in this neighborhood, and perhaps for other youth as well, thinking ten years into the future is a bizarre abstraction. These are the kids of America's abandoned urban agenda, the "cutback kids" under constant police helicopter surveillance, the kids of our post-after-school playground inner-cities with few other legal enrichment activities. This experiment in ritual forced a future vision of

themselves, a future even with spouses and children.

Central High exists as a Los Angeles Unified School District "Options" school. Established to accommodate the soaring aspirations of returning World War I veterans, Options programs now provide school-aged parents, together with working and at-risk teens, innovative, comprehensive, and individualized study curriculums leading to high school diplomas. For these Options students, however, the diploma comes with a tradeoff: a diploma in exchange for access to a school library, a speech club, a yearbook. In other words, Central High students earn their diplomas at the sacrifice of common rites of passage.

Working closely with Central High students and their talented teacher, Patricia Butler, we developed the "time capsule" concept. The heuristic process of making all the associated choices proved most fruitful: what to keep in, what to leave out, how to identify meaningful items for ten years into the future, how would the students' future children understand (they are to be part of the "reunion" as well). When these debates subsided and the final selections were made, students wrote brief essays exploring each item's respective cultural or anthropological significance. The essays were then excerpted, reduced by photocopier, and attached to the appropriate items: fashion designer tags from pants, shirts, and jackets; U.S. currency reduced to the size of a credit card; somebody's pager; photographs of family cars; poetry samples; a special brand of sunglasses; an issue of T.V. Guide with highlighted favorite programs; an inscribed belt buckle; the cover of Gary Soto's *Chato's Kitchen* (Putnam's, 1995)--the picture book illustrated by Susan Guevara that I read to them to demonstrate the importance of reading to children--and a library card. Many items were students' personal property, reflecting how they came to care about the idea of a time capsule and its embodiment of community.

The insightful essays obliged them to contextualize common material culture. "A pager is one of those things all teens want," wrote Stephanie. "With a pager, you can get hold of your honey or friends wherever they're at. It's good in case of emergencies.... But teenagers want pagers basically for the look."

Beyond the prioritizing of significant material culture, beyond the challenging critical thinking and writing and rhetorical skills required of this time capsule project, the ceremony and ritual still looms large. On the final day, after everything was labeled and stowed, we tied the capsule up with nylon yarn as students said goodbye to a defining moment in their lives. Together with our library's clerk, Lupe Lainez, who offered to stand watch over the capsule (or pass the guardian role on to her successor), we sealed up the treasure in a false wall compartment of the library. Two students have promised to maintain a class address list to insure that everyone gets invited back that spring in the decade of 2000, when we will unearth the capsule and revisit who we were ten years ago.

I have been fortunate to attend many new library building openings in my career. I have listened to the politicians, the clergy, the teachers, and the library administrators talk over the heads of the children assembled there for the photo opportunity--and to symbolize the light that libraries hold. The young people must sit and listen to lectures on how to respect and cherish. But rarely does any part of the ceremony--the ritual--actually include youth culture.

In completing the time capsule ritual, and for at least the next ten years, the students of Central High will connect to this library in ways that our overdue notices have not managed to accomplish. They will see themselves, their pasts, and their futures tied to this space by something thicker than a taxpayer's

burden--something closer to blood.

ADDED MATERIAL

Anthony Bernier is Young Adult Specialist Librarian at the Echo Park Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. He is also a doctoral candidate in history at the University of California, Irvine, and is editing a book on spatial equity for teens in libraries.

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