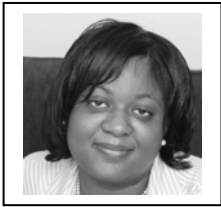


# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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## Witness for Justice #483

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### An Inaccurate Reading

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Now that it is summer, I am reminded of how I came to love the library during my childhood. When I was a kid, just about every week of summer, my mom would load my siblings and me into the car, and take us to make our selections from among the stacks and rows of beautiful books at the public library.

As the needs of our communities have evolved over the years, public libraries have valiantly and consistently revamped. Today, libraries not only house books, but they are also tutoring stations, community meeting venues, and happening spots for children's play dates and puppet shows. For many of the unemployed and underemployed, libraries are life rafts, from which they obtain job training, search for and apply for jobs, prepare for interviews, and monitor their email accounts for responses from prospective employers. My local public library even has a highly efficient email notification system that informs patrons when a book we have reserved becomes available, reminds us when our books are due (or past due), and keeps us posted on library news.

Recently, though, I received an email through the library notification system that surprised and saddened me. Hours are being drastically cut for libraries throughout my county. And unfortunately, our county is far from alone. According to the American Library Association, public libraries throughout the nation are feeling the pinch of the current economic crisis, often being forced to cut back, even as usage for services

like internet, children's programs, and reference materials have spiked to record-high levels since the economic downturn began in 2008. Particularly for individuals and families with shrinking resources, public libraries have become an essential hub of community life, and for meeting personal needs.

Economic times are obviously tight, and states and localities are often faced with tough choices that will inevitably be unpalatable. As constituents, however, we would do well to make sure our local legislators know of the importance of our public libraries to us and our neighbors. Libraries are precious spaces that not only empower young minds to wonder and learn, but which also play a key role in helping folks seeking work to get back on their feet – giving them a place to polish their resumes, search and apply for jobs, and electronically communicate with prospective employers, all with trained library professionals to guide them through the process, free of charge.

Online retailer Amazon.com made news last week by slashing prices for its electronic reader "The Kindle." Electronics manufacturer Apple prompted a surge in electronic book sales with its recently released iPad, and brand new iPhone 4. Technology now makes it possible for a single device to hold content equivalent to some entire public libraries, and it could be easy for those who do not frequent libraries to mistake them for antiquated and obsolete. On the contrary, however, in most cities, libraries are dynamic, equalizing environments where those who have means and those who do not can access essential resources and top-notch professional support. To dismiss our public libraries and those who rely on them as irrelevant relics would be a detrimental and inaccurate reading of our modern times.

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