

By MARGARET MORABITO

The sight of a personal computer in a public library with a group of excited kids crowded around is eye-opening. It's even more impressive when you realize that this may be the only computer these kids can access whenever they want. A public library can be the perfect location for encouraging computer literacy in the community.

The Winchendon, Massachusetts public library and a Commodore 64 system teamed up three years ago in what has turned out to be a very economical arrangement for offering computer usage to hundreds of community members. It was a windfall for the library, initiated by a philanthropic citizen who anonymously donated the system.

Says Julia White, the Winchendon town librarian, "At the time, this was the only place where kids and adults could work with a computer at their leisure and for free. Things are a bit different now, with the schools having several computers, but back then neither the teachers nor the parents could afford a computer. Even with the computers in schools, we still have students coming in after school to use our C-64."

### The Equipment

The Winchendon library has a C-64, a 1541 disk drive, a color monitor and a growing public domain software collection. The entire project has been a bare-bones operation, with the donated equipment, free software and the library staff tutoring the patrons.

As a matter of fact, the library doesn't have even one commercial program. The patrons don't get ex-

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*A public library can enable an entire community to use a computer.*

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posed to the newest software on the market, but they can become familiar with the basics of computer usage.

Some users are regular customers, coming back to learn more and to practice new skills. Some appear a few times, but then don't come back. In many cases, the ones who disappear have decided to purchase their own home computers. In other cases, the initial curiosity has worn off and VCRs have moved in.

Regardless of the long-term outcome, the important point is that this is one method of providing free access to a personal computer for people of any age or economic level.

The Winchendon library is small in comparison to many public libraries, with only about 25,000 volumes, and its budget is limited. White says, "Being able to provide a personal computer in a library this size was unusual when we first got ours, and it still is. Even some of the bigger libraries have no computer for patron use; many have one only for staff use."

White continues, "I would like to get another computer sometime, when we get funding for it. This would be used strictly by the staff for word processing, cataloging books and handling the desk chores, such as

overdue notices, which are especially time-consuming."

### Individual Attention

There are three staff members to handle the 35 hours per week the library is open, and one of them is only half-time. Ms. White is the head of the computer operation, and her four years of experience as a Commodore user place her in the veteran category. However, she is quick to point out that the other staff members are capable of helping patrons with computer questions when she's otherwise occupied.

The small number of patrons using the computer at any one time has kept supervision of the project within reasonable bounds. The demand has been continuous, but it has not called for formal classes. Training is handled on the spot, and users can either drop in unannounced or make an advance reservation. If a patron comes in and wants to learn how to use the computer, the librarian will take the time to show him or her the proper procedure for turning on the equipment, how to handle a disk, how to load and list a directory, and how to load and run a program.

"Actually, this individualized instruction is rarely found today," says White. "We can do it because we are so small—and the people appreciate it."

### Supplementary Materials

The *Commodore 64 Programmer's Reference Guide* stands beside the monitor as a reference for technical questions that the librarians cannot answer. Other books have become popular with the patrons as well. A big hit is

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## **R** The Resource Center

*The Computer Playground*, by M. J. Winter (Datamost, 1983), which contains examples and short programs that students can type into their C-64s or VIC-20s.

Game books are also favorites, notably *The A to Z Book of Computer Games*, by T. McIntire (TAB Books, 1979), and *Commodore 64 Games*, from Compute! Publications (1981). The latter has been used so much that the library had to have it rebound! Games, of course, can be quite instructive for someone wanting to learn about programming. They also tend to be lively, and they prompt the user to interact with the computer.

All of these books provide short programs to type in. White points out that what people need most are very short programs that actually do something they can watch, listen to or use for a practical purpose. Programs they can type in at one sitting are the most popular. These give the user a feeling of accomplishment at having completed a project, and they provide enough programming routines to demonstrate at least one aspect of programming, whether it's how a GOTO works or the function of a Print statement.

### **Software**

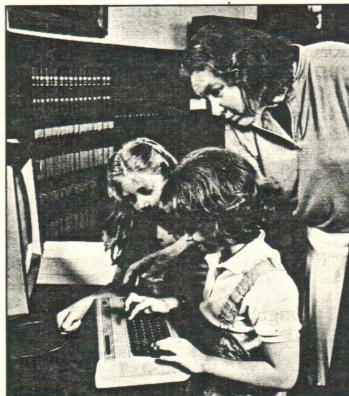
As for software, the library has only public domain programs, primarily from Commodore. "When we first got started, public domain software was the only route to go. Commodore was very helpful then in providing disks that we could copy and return." Now, most Commodore public domain software is available for a minimal price in the same stores that sell C-64s and from mail-order houses.

The library hasn't purchased any commercial programs or any peripherals, such as a much-needed printer, because the trustees haven't allotted the necessary money. Even so, the public domain software has kept the project going, and the more advanced patrons write their own programs and share them.

Which programs are worthwhile? Well, there are some that are used over and over again. Of these, some are strictly educational and some are games. White doesn't feel it's wise to stock up on too many games. "We

don't want this place turning into an arcade parlor, but supplying a few games is useful because it gets the kids interested in using the computer quickly; it breaks the ice."

Over the years, some public domain programs have become hits with the Winchendon patrons. Madlibs is an educational program that teaches parts of speech. The student is prompted to provide his or her own words to match up with a particular part of speech. When asked for an adjective, the child needs to know what an adjective is. "Every so often I'll get someone racing up to ask me what an adverb is," laughs White.



*Librarian Julia White and young patrons.*

After the student supplies the words, the program incorporates them into a silly story. The child selects which one of a collection of stock stories the program should use.

Another popular educational program is the traditional game Concentration. The user has to remember where certain graphic designs, letters or words are hidden behind blocks on the screen. The task is to uncover matching pairs.

Snoopy Number Line is a math program that provides practice in identifying positive and negative numbers. A number line is displayed, and the student has to identify where the cursor lies on the line; too many incorrect answers and the game is lost. Other popular programs at the library are games such as Duck Shoot, Westward Ho and Dam Busters.

### **Maintenance**

The library's Commodore system has not required much maintenance or repair in four years. Once, the power supply had to be repaired. The main source of problems has been the disk drive. It has gone out of alignment a few times. "Whenever a piece of equipment is used by many different people, you'll find that it breaks down more quickly than with one user. That's just the way it is," says White. The computer itself has not required any work.

Additional costs for the library have been minimal. They had to install an electrical outlet for the computer system, and they purchased a large computer table. "I recommend that any library thinking of getting a computer should be sure to get a large table also," White said. "Patrons need to be able to spread out their papers, books and disks."

This kind of computer project offers invaluable benefits to all members of the community, young and old, and the expenses to the library are small. Those of you who have just purchased a new 64C or C-128 might consider donating your little-used VIC-20 or C-64 to your local library. It might be the perfect second home for your old computer. R

*If you're using Commodore computers for educational purposes (at home or at school) and would like to share your experiences through The Resource Center, write me a letter detailing the equipment you're using, subject areas being taught, grade level or age of your students, software you are using and any other information you feel like including.*

*Also, if you'd like to donate public domain educational programs to The Resource Center for sharing with other educators or parents, please send along a disk with a brief description of the programs. Send correspondence and disks to:*

*Margaret Morabito  
The Resource Center  
c/o RUN Editorial  
80 Pine St.  
Peterborough, NH 03458*

*You can also leave messages in my on-line mailboxes: CompuServe (70616,714) and QuantumLink (MARGM).*