

Librarian enjoys helping out others

By Carol Bryant

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If you're playing Trivial Pursuit, you want Ella Rathod on your team.

Rathod, a reference and adult services librarian at Edith Abbott Memorial Library, answers a lot of trivia questions at work.

"People even call me from bars," she said. "We settle bets all the time."

Rathod fields all kinds of questions every day, but she doesn't mind.

"The best part is working with people. I love working with people," she said.

One of her most unusual calls came from a mortuary. The caller wanted some ideas for a quotation to inscribe on a gravestone of a Grand Island resident. Rathod gave a few suggestions.

Rathod and her husband, Samuel, came to the United States from India in 1971 so he could earn a master's degree in the New Testament at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill. She earned her bachelor's degree in English from the college and worked in its library.

She said her background gives her an edge with people whose first language is not English.

"I help people with language troubles. They feel like I'm more approachable. Even though I may not speak Spanish, I can communicate with them," she said.

The library is making an effort to address multiculturalism. It subscribes to magazines such as Hispanic and Essence. Rathod said the library has some instructional language tapes and children's books in both Spanish and English. She would like to get more bilingual books and ones written in Spanish.

She said there's a high interest in adult books written at simpler English levels. The library is looking into getting signs in other languages to identify locations of things such as telephones, bathrooms and the front desk.

The library has also acquired more international business books.

"The economy is going to go global," she said.

People can do more than read books or magazines at the library. Books on tape and videos are also available.

Rathod said technological changes are having big effects on libraries. People have access to more information and can get it faster than before. Information also takes up less space on computer equipment than in rows of books and magazines.

The most obvious change is the replacement of the card catalog system with a computerized version. One terminal meets Americans with Disabilities Act requirements with large print and earphones for the hearing impaired.

"It's a constant challenge to keep up with technology. It's an exciting challenge," she said.

In Grand Island's library, CD-ROMs give patrons access to phone number directories throughout the country. Previously, the library had several shelves filled with phone books. The library is also investigating getting Internet access. Staff members have on-line access to answer reference questions about medicine or law.

"We do not give legal or medical opinions," she said.

"I like learning new things. In technology, everything is changing so much," she said. "Libraries have bright futures with all the changes."

But technology won't make dinosaurs out of books and magazines.

"There will always be print materials in libraries," she said.

Rathod prefers reading nonfiction, such as biographies of famous people or cookbooks.

"Fiction to me is a luxury I can't afford right now," she said. "I order books, too. I have to be familiar with everything."

Rathod said the city has supported library acquisitions.

"The city has been very good to us the last few years. They constantly ask us our goals and dreams," she said.

Rathod said her library "wish list" includes items to help it keep up with the technological boom. More CD-ROM disks and on-line services are needed.

The most difficult part of her job comes when many patrons want help at the same time. "I think we get overwhelmed because sometimes there are 10 people waiting," she said.

Sometimes she has trouble determining what someone wants to find. "What they're thinking and what I'm thinking are two different things. It's like we're on two separate wave lengths."

The Rathods moved to Nebraska in 1974. Before coming to Grand Island, they lived in Shelton for seven years. He was a minister there, and she worked at the town's library.

In June 1991, they moved to Grand Island. She started working at the library that September. Her husband is a district administrator for United Methodist churches.

The Rathods have three children. Nicholas, 19, is a student at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln. Janet, 17, is a junior at Northwest High School. Jason, 11, is a fifth-grader at Knickrehm Elementary School.

Rathod said she tries to spend a lot of time with her children. Her husband's job also has her entertaining guests frequently. She likes to read and cook in the spare time she does have.

"Someday, I would like to travel a lot," she said.

Her last visit to India was in 1986. Her husband recently returned from a three-week trip there. Their children haven't been to India since they were young.

"We want to take a trip there so they can see their roots, so they have a sense of connection," she said.