

## Mr.X

Mr. X shuffles into the engineering library with a wide brim hat and a big toothy smile. His wrinkled face leans over the reference desk, and he eagerly whispers at me. "I'm working on a new project," he says. He produces a scrap of paper and with one gnarled finger points at it. "This is going to be a great invention. Going to revolutionize things. Revolutionize." He nods and looks to me for agreement. I meet his eyes and nod in return. He realizes that he must engage me in some way. "So," he continues in his urgent library whisper, "So, if you could find out more about L.E.D. light technology for me, I would cut you in. You'd be part of the team," he says, winking. I examine his crumpled magazine clipping closely. This is the game we play with Mr. X at the engineering library. We pretend to help him.

Mr. X is suffering dementia due to illness or age. The librarians tell me that he used to visit the library like any other public patron. He used to research engineering information, diligently working away on projects that he never shared with library staff. But sadly, in recent years, he has changed. His stories make little sense. Perhaps he suffered a stroke. No one knows. Strangely, he is my most memorable experience as a library assistant, causing me to reflect on the values of the profession I intend to enter.

It could be argued that it is because he is not entirely in his right mind, that he seeks our help with such enthusiasm. The average library patron is often reluctant to ask for assistance – sometimes intimidated, sometimes uncomfortable in his/her lack of knowledge and vulnerability. Mr. X, who must be about eighty, suffers none of these insecurities. He understands the reference staff desires nothing more than to be useful; we *want* to answer reference questions. Intelligently, he uses this knowledge as a ploy to engage our attention, to partake in his Don Quixote-style dreams of entrepreneurship.

Of course, it can be very frustrating pretending to help someone whose information need is not real or even sensible. I think this is the distinction between wanting to be merely helpful and wanting to be useful. Library staff genuinely wants to assist people in their pursuit of knowledge, to further advance learning or a field of study to some practical end. It's unlikely that Mr. X even comprehends any of the books or articles that he quietly studies, sitting for hours in the reference section. Even so, we treat him the same as we would any patron: listening, trying to discern his question, searching the databases for relevant information. I follow my boss's suggestion, and I print out an article for him each time, and he walks away, thanking me profusely. What I have learned is this: the most important aspect of librarianship is the simplest -- the promotion of equality and respect. Mr. X has taught me that.