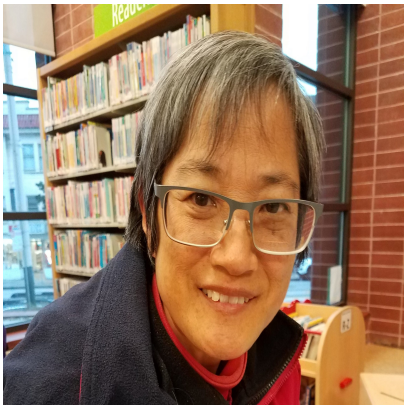

Searching for ways to cope, twice laid-off worker envisions role for community libraries

Description

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Mimi Tong, 67, didnâ??t plan to stop working when she was laid off from her job as an administrative assistant at the University of California San Francisco, but after three years in the job market, she became what economists call an involuntary retiree, a pushout.

With the job search behind her, Tong started building her new life. She took art classes at City College; began attending the West Portal Senior Center for line-dancing, lunch, and friendship. She enjoyed cruises with friends, and regularly visited her local library.

Itâ??s there she discovered a new mission: making neighborhood libraries more useful for seniors.

Mimi Tong (Photo by Judy Goddess)

â??There are books on what to expect at school and at work, but there arenâ??t any books on what to expect when you retire. The lack of structure, how to meet people. You listen to your parents and your teachers when youâ??re young, but no one instructs you on this next stage. Where is your mooring? How do you structure your time? Your life? Your finances?â?•

Libraries offer great programs for children, teens and young adults, but not for seniors, she said. With the support of the head librarian, Tong helped her local branch, the Parkside library, develop arts and crafts programs for seniors. Programming at branch libraries is primarily at the discretion of the local staff, dependent on available space and budget.

Luckily, Parkside was able to offer these classes because they didnâ??t require an outside facilitator. The librarian, also a craftsperson, ran the classes herself, with Tongâ??s help. â??Before each

session, Iâ??d follow her directions so when it came time for the class, I could help the others,â?• said Tong.

A place to â??ignite the soulâ??

Tong is energized by the idea that libraries can be more than books, magazines and DVDs; that like the Greek agora, they can be a place to assemble and discuss ideas. They can build communities, create a better quality of life and be a vital part of what makes San Francisco a great city, she wrote in a letter to the cityâ??s head librarian.

â??A lot of people donâ??t think of the library as a place to hang out, to brainstorm, a place for peopleâ??s voices to be heard,â?• Tong said. â??It can be a place to ignite the soul, turn the unseen into the seen.â?•

In Chinatown, where she grew up, people didnâ??t have living rooms, she said. â??The library was our indoor living room; the park our outdoor living room.

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Tong, a native San Franciscan, had wanted to study sociology at San Francisco State University, but when her father retired on disability, he insisted she learn practical, employment-ready skills.

After earning a certificate in business technology from City College â?? how to use the adding machine and other technology of the time â?? Tong was hired as an administrative assistant at Chevron. She held that job for over 26 years until the new manager, brought in after Chevronâ??s acquisition of Texaco in 2001, reorganized the division and Tong was without a job. Until, that is, she found the job at UCSF where she stayed for six years.

Outdated skills

After that job was also phased out, Tong could not find a job with a comparable salary. â??Employers wanted a bachelorâ??s degree, computer literacy and the ability to multi-task. I didnâ??t have the degree or those skills.â?•

Too young for Social Security, she tried living off her pension and unemployment insurance, but it wasnâ??t enough. â??The financial reality is truly difficult. Our pensions are not keeping up with expenses.â?•

Sadly, for Tong the art classes were discontinued under the new head librarian. While Elisa De Sampos Salles plans to schedule some craft activities in the near future, â??Iâ??m trying to mix it up,â?• she said. â??I scheduled a salsa class and a Zumba class, and both were well attended. Weâ??re a small library without a dedicated meeting space and with a limited budget. Children are our priority during the day. I appreciate Mimiâ??s feedback and wish we could do more programs.â?•

Librarians balance community needs

The San Francisco Main Library has a 50+ committee that focuses on what older adults need, said Jane Glasby, its co-chair and director of the Talking Books and Braille Center. So far, the committeeâ??s focus has been on purchasing more books about older adults or with older adults as

central characters, improving physical accessibility and providing workshops that address legal issues, health and technology. â??I wish we could do everything for everyone,â?• she said, â??but we donâ??t have the resources or time.â?•

Glasby advised seniors to check out the libraryâ??s calendar for a list of upcoming programs geared to seniors, and to contact her with suggestions for other programs: jglasby@sfpl.org.

Marti Goddard, the city libraryâ??s Access Services Manager and ADA Coordinator, conceded it might be time to rethink their senior programs. Having recently attended a talk by geriatrician Dr. Louise Aronson, author of â??Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life,â?• Goddard said, â??We offer special programs for children, teens and young adults. We need to consider the needs of seniors.â?•

Tong would heartily agree. â??Itâ??s time for new thoughts about what seniors can be,â?• she said. â??People think of retirement as a time to kick back, but itâ??s not only that. Itâ??s all about possibility. We can be like Greek philosophers and usher in a new age.â?•

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