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## ANOTHER VOICE

# Libraries were meant to be free

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want to tell you about a young girl with a lot of things stacked against her: Her father died when she was 5; her mother tried hard to raise the girl and her younger brother, but mental illness drove the mother to abuse and neglect both the children.

The death of the family's father and breadwinner dealt a severe financial blow to the family. On many nights, there wasn't enough to eat. Sometimes the children never made it to school. Sometimes the girl, with overwhelming dread, wore mismatched shoes and clothes that were too big, or whatever came out of the used clothing bag, just to go to school.

And school was no picnic. She stayed home many days to take care of her mom and watch out for her brother. One year, her uncle gave her a bicycle, and with that new-found freedom, she rode to the local library.

The library was in a small stone

house three miles away. The librarian saw the girl's hunger for literature. When the girl was 10, the librarian introduced her to L. Frank Baum, Frances Hodgson Burnett and Jean Craighead George. When she was 11, the librarian put her hand on her back, and let her to John Steinbeck, to "The Red Pony" and "East of Eden."

Then she read Thomas Wolfe's "You Can't Go Home Again." The world, as she knew it, grew larger, richer, deeper. She knew there was more than just the small house, the sadness, the empty kitchen, the small stone library.

That girl never had more than a nickel in her pocket, but without that library, she never would have had the courage to leave home, come to Oregon, attend the University of Oregon and make something of her life. Of that much, I am sure.

The County Commission heard testimony this week that the way to solve the library problem is to insti-

tute user fees. That girl would never have been able to pay your user fees.

And if she hadn't, you wouldn't have Nora's Table, or me, or Stu, in your community. I was that little girl.

Go ahead and charge user fees for hunting and fishing licenses, for boating, for parking, for workers' compensation, for business licenses, for wood cutting, for Christmas tree cutting, for toll roads, for building permits and health permits and liquor licenses. All of which I've paid.

But leave something for free: for the rich, the poor, the abused, the misinformed, the questing, the angry, the young, the old and the children who have no other way of seeing the world.

Libraries were meant to be free. And whatever we have to do to make them free, every one of us should do.

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*Kathy Watson of Hood River owns Nora's Table restaurant and serves on the Hood River Port Commission.*