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UCSC Reference Library

Everything You Wanted To Know But Were Afraid To Ask

By SYLVIA TOWNSEND
Sentinel Staff Writer

If you wanted to know if Albert Einstein ever talked to himself, how would you find out?

One successful method would be to call UCSC's McHenry Library's reference desk, where librarians found the answer for a curious student.

"We found the answer several weeks after we gave up," head reference librarian Joe Michalak admitted.

"We found the answer in a rather roundabout way.

"Someone on the staff's father lives in New York. The father plays the violin with someone very good, and this person used to play the violin

with Einstein.

"She (the librarian) asked him (her father's friend) the question when she was home on vacation, and it turned out that Einstein did talk to himself.

"The guy remembered."
Most of the 1,500 questions asked each month are easier to answer.

The six reference librarians will answer anyone's queries.

"The library is open to the public," Michalak noted.

"We have open stacks and open access. We don't ask people who they are."

However, although the librarians will not refuse to answer questions on the basis of the person asking, they may decline their services on the

basis of the inquiry itself.

"We try not to answer contest questions or to solve crossword puzzles," Michalak said, adding that they often have difficulty knowing the caller's motives.

"They're not going to tell us it's for a contest or a barroom bet."

Librarians refused to help several recent callers who sought answers to obscure McDonald's hamburger contest questions.

Another type of information the librarians won't give out is medical or legal advice.

"Liability is involved," Michalak explained.

"We direct people to the California Code, but we don't interpret it.

"We also don't get involved in

genealogical research. We don't have the resources."

People tracing their family trees are directed to a genealogical society.

When the reference desk is busy, librarians give first preference to students and faculty. People who come to the library get their questions answered before those who call on the phone.

Michalak and his co-workers respond to questions they can find answers to in a few minutes; for more difficult questions they guide inquirers through their research.

The public may peruse the library's 650,000 volumes, and, for a charge, use computerized data bases which contain abstracts from journals on various subjects.



(Sentinel Photo)

UCSC reference librarian Rex Beckhan

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