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Library: Don't take no for an answer

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OLD BRIDGE — Librarian Tim Niland sat patiently in front of the computer screen awaiting his next assignment. A short time later, he was alerted to an incoming message.

"I'm looking for a Web site with articles on Greek theater," a client named Alex wrote.

"Did you mean theater in the past or present?" Niland typed on the keyboard.

"Past," Alex replied.

"Like ancient times?" wrote Niland.

"Yes," Alex replied.

Niland immediately began a search on the Internet and forwarded two sites to Alex for investigation.

Niland mans the New Jersey Library Network's Q & A service on Mondays at the Old Bridge Public Library. The free service allows Internet users to chat live with librarians as they seek answers to questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Managed by the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative, the service was started in the fall of 2001, said Karen Hyman, executive director of the cooperative.

"It was the first statewide service in the United States," she said.

Originally available from 1 p.m. to 11 p.m., the service was expanded to a 24/7 schedule in January 2002, she said.

"We went from 100 questions per week to 100 questions per day," she said. "In a busy month, we might have about 5,000 questions. When school's in session, we get quite a few more questions from students.

The questions run the gamut from inquiries about taxation, health, job hunting and landlord-tenant issues to helping with homework assignments, Hyman said.

"Sometimes it's a question that will simply settle a bet," she said.

The site, which can be accessed through participating libraries' Web sites and by visiting www.qandanj.org, is staffed by more than 300 librarians from 49 libraries throughout the state, Hyman said.

Residents have access to the service, even if they are away on vacation or on a business trip.

"In most cases, the system will recognize a client's computer as being located in New Jersey," said Hyman. "In those cases, a library card is not needed to access the service."

At the Old Bridge Library, Niland is one of the eight librarians who staff the service twice a week.

"We typically get between three and five calls per session," said C.L. Quillen, the library's director of public services. "When schools are in session, it may go up a bit."

Clients range from students to senior citizens.

"A lot the questions come from older folks, who may not go to the library in person any more, but are working on things from home," Quillen said. "A lot of people are looking for consumer-health information. Some of the questions are more personal, and because of the confidentiality of the service, they are more comfortable doing it on the computer than coming in and asking face to face."

"We also get a lot of calls from students who need help with homework assignments," Niland said. "We can't do the homework for them. We just kind of give them a shove in the right direction, so they are able to get good solid information. That's what makes it fun. The variety of it. You'll get some really in-depth questions and then — "What should I name my dog?" "
