



York's seasonal workers link to homelands via WiFi access

York library's Wi-Fi opens a portal to world



Tamara Jovanovic, from Serbia, and Ken Shacter, visiting family in Cape Neddick, share a bench at the York Public Library after hours to access the facility's wifi system.

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People sitting on a bench outside the York Public Library seemingly talking to themselves in a foreign language is no longer an extraordinary sight for Library Director Robert Waldman.

"They're here almost every day," Waldman said.

They are seasonal workers in town for the summer and others taking advantage of the library's free Wi-Fi Internet access. Often the young men and women who work at York Beach hotels, motels and restaurants are at the library before and after hours. They sit on the two wooden benches at the library's front entrance, computers open on their laps, headphones in their ears, and sometimes a video picture of their friend or family member on the screen, talking to loved ones back home in Serbia, Turkey and elsewhere.

The audio and video service is available through Skype software, Waldman said.

The benches are often occupied when the library is open, he said. But it's after hours that York's "computer cafe," as Waldman calls it, really heats up.

"Evenings after we close, weekends, are busier. That's when we see the most dramatic use," he said. "It really is a sign of the times the numbers of people in the community who find out about our computer cafe."

Tamara Jovanovic, 21, sat on the bench this past Tuesday around 7 p.m. She came to York from Serbia three weeks ago, working in housekeeping at the Anchorage Inn at the beach. She lives with three friends in a house near the library and has another part-time job at Cumberland Farms on York Street.

When she has a free moment, she comes to the library, Jovanovic said, sometimes going inside but often just "catching wireless" outside the door.

The computer cafe is used by seasonal visitors as well. Ken Shacter of Jacksonville, Fla., was checking e-mail from the bench Tuesday. He and his wife, Carolyn Shacter, come up to Cape Neddick during the summer to visit family. There's no Internet access at the house. This is Ken's second summer on the library bench.

"I recognize people," he said.

As yet, he's not seen any formal social network form around the wireless one.

On Friday, the day after a wind storm slammed York causing widespread power outages, Waldman came to work expecting the library "to be slammed," he said. When the power was out during a winter storm, residents took advantage of the library's heat and electricity to stay warm and connected.

The library wasn't as busy as he thought. "We've got some people coming in who lost power," he said. "Some are sitting outside using their own personal computer."

Before PCs became more widespread, the library was among the key places people came to use the desktop computers, Waldman said.

Seasonal workers still gather at the library, which offers foreign language tapes and other resources to help them navigate their summer home.

Inside the library Tuesday, two young women from Denizli, Turkey, Ece Ibanoglu, 20, and Keuser Afyon, 23, were connecting to family and friends through the desktop computers. They live and work at the Inn Between the Beaches in York Beach and walk to the library in town at least once a week, they said.

"In some ways, the greater service, as well as access to the Internet, is the social network," Waldman said. "That feeling of a comfortable welcoming place to be."

At Lane Memorial Library in Hampton, Reference Librarian Marija Sanderling isn't seeing the number of seasonal workers she used to see at the library. "A lot of hotels now have wireless they can access," she said.

Those who do come to the library are usually inside, using the desktops, she said. "I'm guessing either they don't have laptops, (and also) it's quite a distance to travel from the beach to the library. We do occasionally get people sitting out in the parking lot, using their laptops."