

Without a cross word

One library's answer to torn out text

by Mary Van Ornum

It happens in the best of libraries. A reader turns to an anticipated section of a publication only to find that the very text he or she seeks is missing. An article in a medical journal has been surgically excised. A case in a law journal has suffered a change of venue. The interview in *Rolling Stone* has traveled. The centerfold in—well, you get the picture. All are examples of material removed by library patrons. The predator may use a utensil (blade, scissors, wet string) or simply tear out the section by hand, but whatever the method, the material is missing for the next reader. In one cliptomaniacal case at Vassar College Library in Poughkeepsie, New York, it was the daily disappearance of the crossword puzzle from a heavily read newspaper.

Here's what happened to us and what we did about it.

In the summer of 2002, our library staff discovered that the daily crossword puzzle in a New York newspaper was being mysteriously and, with surgical-like precision, neatly razored from its page. We say mysteriously because, unlike many libraries that keep daily papers at the circulation desk for checkout and return, Vassar places its newspapers on open shelving in a comfortable but unmonitored soft-seating area. We therefore cannot track who last read which issue, or in what condition it was returned to the shelf. Furthermore, patrons may tote periodicals to any part of the three-level

library, and leave them in that location to be collected and reshelved.

The vanishing puzzle problem went on for weeks. We considered a variety of approaches. We could post a sign near the newspapers, reminding readers not to mutilate (a preposterous message given Vassar's genteel environment). We could hide behind a potted fern in gumshoe fashion, spying on patrons in hopes of identifying the delinquent, but we had no potted fern. We could assign a staff member to sit nearby, pretending to read while attuned to every suspicious move, but that was too obvious, and an impractical use of a staffer's time.

Then, I had an idea: Reach the cryptic culprit in his or her own manner by communicating through a crossword puzzle. In this manner, we hoped to both get our point across and bring down the incidence of clipping.

Using Microsoft Word, I created a table and worked the grid, randomly employing words that expressed the uncivil behavior of The Clipper (as our staff had by now dubbed the miscreant) and its effect on the rest of the library community. Within an hour, I designed a simple crossword puzzle (see illustration on the next page) that directly addressed the clipping problem. Rather than getting snippy, the puzzle's tone was pleasant, yet its purpose firm and clear.

The words of the puzzle, its clues and definitions were kept to a third-grade reading level

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Crossword

Today's theme: CUT IT OUT (not the puzzle, the behavior)
 Prepared on behalf of the Vassar Community—the students,
 faculty, and staff who find the paper they share every day now
 mutilated by a single individual.



Across

- Cease
- Self-centered
- Everyone looking forward to crossword puzzle that was cut out
- Below the standards of human decency
- Only one who matters
- Petty
- Remove the contents
- Newspaper that does not belong to you
- Tear out
- Feeling of library users when material is abused
- Destroy; disfigure
- Offense; wrongdoing
- Make a conclusion about the culprit

Down

- First letters of words "selfish" and "sneaky"
- Someone who takes what is not theirs
- Purchase
- Against the 7th Commandment
- Interior guidelines of right and wrong
- What photocopy machines do
- Pay for subscription with own funds
- Misdeed
- Right or benefit to be respected
- Dishonor; consciousness of guilt
- Destruction
- Incise, dissect, trim, sever
- Damage beyond repair
- Day when puzzle will no longer be cut out
- Fellow newspaper readers
- Offense against moral law

and were limited to repetition of a single theme: This is wrong. Others are affected. Please stop.

For example: The answer to the clue for 9 Across (Tear out) was "Rip," and the answer to the clue for 14 Down (Day when puzzle will no longer be cut out) was "Today."

To assure that this message got across to The Clipper, I photocopied my authentic-looking crossword at a reduced size so that its measurements equaled those of the newspaper puzzle. Next, at the time of the paper's early morning delivery before check-in, I carefully affixed

the fake puzzle over the newspaper's printed one. Finally, I shelved the baited newspaper and waited.

Would the offending individual be offended? Would the paper be maliciously tampered with again? Or had the polite petition convinced The Clipper to retire the razor?

Harnessing my curiosity, I waited until after 3 p.m. to check the news. The thought of another cut out puzzle was, well, criminal. When I finally went up to peek at the paper, I found that the Vassar homemade puzzle-with-a-message had been removed, but that the newspaper's puzzle remained intact for the first time in three weeks.

A flood of questions followed. Was this just a fluke, and would the culprit reconsider his or her response and strike again tomorrow? Perhaps The Clipper had not come in to read the paper and someone else had intercepted the message. But the next day, the day after that, and the day after that, the paper's puzzle remained.

Since that summer morning, the crossword puzzle has not been tampered with, except for a few pernicious pens. We never discovered who the culprit was.

Vassar tells this tale simply because it illustrates a unique, effective approach to a familiar problem. In our case, the case of the purloined puzzle was resolved. Perhaps your library can adapt or rework this idea and put it to use in successful ways. ■