



## **APPLE LIBRARY**

**for the HANDICAPPED CHILD**

**A celebrating ten-years-old special library at the Joint Library - Mid Sweden University Library, the Public Library of Härnösand and the County Library of Västernorrland – all in one in Härnösand, county town of Västernorrland, 350 km north of Stockholm, in the middle of Sweden.**

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**How did it all begin** and why did we choose an apple as the symbol of a library for children with handicap?

The computer company Apple immediately offered to sponsor the computer terminal when they were told the name of the special library and the Swedish wood sculptor Tomas Skimutis fell for the idea of a giant red apple for all the senses in the form of a hut which welcomes visitors. He also claimed that he received messages from outer space when he was working on the apple. Every evening peculiar letters appeared on his TV-screen and they did not disappear until he had copied and transferred them to the stairs leading up to the entrance of the apple.

The apple stands for both wisdom and curiosity in our Nordic mythology. It is also associated with security. The three – metre high red apple is visible directly from the head entrance of the Joint Library, showing the way up to the second floor to the special section for young library-visitors. Inside the apple you may find children whispering secrets to one another, observing the outside world through the spy-hole in the floor, or letting themselves be enchanted by the arabesque patterns of the kaleidoscope. The other day we also saw some XXXL feet sticking out from the apple. It was two youngsters reading a thrilling book together.

“It is important for our children to be part of the normal division”, the teachers from the special school for the handicapped pointed out to us. They said that the special library should not be divided off but should be part of the rest of the public living-room.

“But the library should not spread out in all direction either. The blind and partially sighted children need to know from one visit to the next how the room is furnished, and which angles and jutting out corners to avoid”, said representatives from Swedish Federation of Visually Handicapped, who helped us to stick height marking onto the stairs and promised to be our special watchers for the blind children in the Apple Library

Right from the start, all of the handicap associations in Västernorrland County were invited to participate in the reference group of the Apple Library. They were assigned the task of critically examining the library for weaknesses with regard to the respective handicap. The list of necessary measures from the Asthma and Allergy Association was the longest one. For example all potted plants had to go, the floors were to be mopped with water and the bookshelves to be dusted at least once a week!

“It does not matter how far we have to travel”, said one mother with an autistic son. They live 150 km away and make a point of visiting the Apple Library on Saturdays. Parents and handicapped children from all over Västernorrland County meet here. The parents socialize and wander around among the bookshelves while their children explore all the possibilities of the Apple Library – within earshot and at a comfortable distance.

The Apple Library has been much frequented ever since its inauguration ten years ago. School classes from special schools throughout the county and from the Kristina School – a school for children from throughout northern Sweden who are deaf or have hearing impediments – pay regular visits during term-time. Colleagues from near and far have made study visits and, in some cases, created their own apple libraries and bookshelves. Ulla Palmér, who is the head librarian of the Children’s Library in Härnösand, participated in the Apple-suggested reading project

which compiled a list of suggested reading for children with intellectual handicap. The first edition has newly been followed by a second one

“All handicapped children have abilities which should be brought out through loving care and attention so that they may participate in and benefit from the society around them”, said Beverley Mathias from the National Library for the Handicapped Child in London during a lecture at our inauguration. Beverley has been a major source of inspiration for the Apple Library. She was the one to give us a red plastic apple with a flashing worm. It comes out when for example an autistic child is brave enough to speak up loudly for anybody to hear. What became of the English library? The last we heard from them was that they were worried about continued funding for the running of the library. It was entirely dependent on benevolent sponsors. We have not encountered such problems in Härnösand. The National Council for Cultural Affairs, the State Inheritance Fund, Västernorrland County Library and Härnösand Public Library have all done their best to guarantee both the establishment and continued operations of the Apple Library.

Except for the elevators and toilets with extra broad entrances, alarm-buttons and a voice to guidance, door-openings, hearing-aids, telephone with display and passable ways for people in wheel-chairs to come around in the library, we also have all sort of talking books, books in blind characters, videotapes in sign language, easy readers, books in large print, tactile books and pop-up books in the bookshelves and play-games and reading-programs in the computer and of course pedagogical toys for example so called Waldorf-puppets (stuffed with wool and equipped with glasses, wheel-chair and hearing aid for identity matter), Jig-saw puzzles and a lot of other things. There is also a book-case with informing, pedagogical literature for adults - parents and teachers.

“**Since the deaf people** have not been able to speak for themselves, those who can hear have been their spokesmen, but this is about to change! A new generation will start to make demands for their own language, a language which has been one of the official languages in Sweden since 1981”. These were the opening words of a teacher from the Kristina School at our first planning meeting for the SIGN LANGUAGE CORNER (Bibliotekken) a project at the Joint Library in Härnösand for children who are deaf or have hearing impediments.

This was intended as an offshoot from the Apple Library and to work in close co-operation with the Kristina School.

The library staff attended a sign language course. Two young people with hearing impediments and with interest in library work were offered labour market placements and close co-operation with pupils and teachers at the Kristina School was established.

Since the Sign Language Corner is also intended as a meeting point for deaf children and those who can hear, we invited all upper level compulsory school classes in Härnösand to a comic strip course, which was held in conjunction with the inauguration six years ago. This resulted in a joint comic.

Lectures about the culture of deaf, silent theatre, a mime evening and a book-club on the Internet with the Swedish author Lasse Ekholm are further events which have been arranged under the auspices of the Sign Language Corner.

**Inspired of the Open Media /Open Learning**, a project in the west-coast libraries in Sweden - which means reading-workshops in public libraries with all sorts of aids and assistance– together with the money support, which goes (by law) with every handicapped student registered at the Mid Sweden University Libray, we started a reading-workshop at the Joint Library in Härnösand. There you will find: computers with different reading programs, dictionaries, info-voice, scanner, zoom-text, Find-reader, Reader and display also in blind characters.

This last summer we have also been sponsored by The National Council for Culture Affairs and the County Council of Västernorrland to hire an interior architect, specialised on mapping out how much or how little access there is for handicapped people to participate in the regional cultural life. We have to make a lot of improvements in many areas before we may call us a public library in all senses.

Somebody said and it is a true sentence:

No one is born into a life of handicap. Handicap is not a characteristic, it is always a relationship between a person and his or her surrounding environment.

**You are all very welcome the 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> of November this year to celebrate our ten-year-old Apple Library in Härnösand, Sweden!**