

Shelter Should Not Mean Sheltered: Creating an Information Resource Centre for Abused Women

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Abstract: Imagine having to leave your house with nothing, leaving in the middle of the night balancing a suitcase while your children cling to you, crying softly. Perhaps you are new to a country and you have no idea where to turn for help. Your spouse is abusive and you fear for your life and the lives of your children. Many people do not entertain these thoughts, but it is thoughts such as these that enabled the author of this article to reach out and help those in need. Using her experience in Canada, the author chronicles the development of a library/resource centre in a local women's shelter. Born out of compassion fatigue and fear, it led to a greater sense of community both in the shelter and beyond. This article will open a dialogue about the ways in which academic librarians can be directly involved in the community beyond the walls of the library.

Keywords: academic librarians, women's shelter, domestic violence, compassion fatigue, resource centers, volunteerism

Introduction

Academic librarians are a sheltered breed known for hiding under the shadow of professional rocks, only coming out when access to information is threatened. The fabled ivory tower fosters a sense of safety to us librarians; the students' stress and their sad sobs are our only tie to reality. Academic librarians are not civically minded and rarely get involved in the lives of the downtrodden, unless it is to stand in the defense of all librarians or to add a few extra lines of community service to a curriculum vitae that is heavy on research and short on engagement.

The above fabrication is damning to librarians, but it is unfortunately a view that I have encountered numerous times over. The academic librarians I know are passionately driven to create change in their communities, whether it is to sit on the board of a local daycare or to stand up for the rights of those on the margins of society, academic performance review be damned. Those are the members of society who hold the rest of us up and challenge us to create changes where we can in our lives. This article chronicles the development of a resource centre in a women's shelter as one example of how we can create change in our communities, and it shows that impact does not have to be grandiose to be meaningful.

Compassion Fatigue in the Helping Professions

I feel safe in saying that as librarians we are dedicated to helping people. Public libraries are heralded as spaces of refuge for all types of community members, from the successful entrepreneur or the burgeoning high school student, to the lost mentally ill and the homeless ghosts. Academic libraries are places for researchers and students to collect, working through the academy and forming the relationships that will carry them through their hopeful futures. As

librarians, we assist our users with their queries every day regardless of the type of library and often have to create emotional barricades in order to keep our empathy in check, to avoid getting too personally involved in the stress of academics. I remember working in a hospital library and having a young woman come to me, book shaking in hand, to let me know that her daughter died and as a result her books were overdue. I had to face her with kindness and professionalism, and if I had broken down in tears in front of her, it would have caused her extra grief. Closing myself into my office and crying after the fact was the result, but it may have saved her some pain. This coping mechanism can result in compassion fatigue, a term that originated in the health sciences (Hardy, 2010), but has grown to encompass everything from philanthropic giving to watching the news (Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron, 1996).

While compassion fatigue is well researched in the health sciences, it is virtually absent in the library literature. Perhaps it is a dark secret in the profession and one that we cannot bring ourselves to face, like many of the helping professions. I want to argue that we do suffer from compassion fatigue and that we stop seeing the individual faces that come across our desks as a way of managing the complex emotions that our users are dealing with. According to Kinnick et al., compassion fatigue is manifested by the feeling of having nothing left to give or an "armour of detachment" (Kinnick, et al., 1996, p. 688). This can happen to the sturdiest librarian, academic or public, and it is found in the moment when we mutter darkly, "Yes, there is such a thing as a stupid question." We can argue that we are above that, but a quick unofficial poll of my colleagues proves otherwise. While it may not be as damaging as healthcare workers who suddenly find themselves unable to care for a patient's emotional or physical needs, it can still undermine our profession. The gaps in the literature regarding librarianship and compassion fatigue may represent an opportunity for further research, as this is a symptom of something that can undermine our profession.

A few years ago I was in a volatile place in life. I was recently divorced, on an unstable work contract, and balancing the needs of three young children. Needless to say, I was one thread away from utter despair on a good day. Compassion fatigue was starting to surface on days when I felt that I had nothing left to give, and I began to get depressed and listless. The one thing that helped me hold it together was by looking for ways to contribute to society in a meaningful way, as opposed to letting the fatigue take over. It was then that I began thinking of creating a library resource centre for those in need. As a newly single mother, I felt an affinity for those in situations similar to mine, so I began searching for local women's shelters to propose my ideas to. One of the oldest women's shelters in my city was receptive to my idea and we began to develop a plan.

Women's Shelter Services

The main women's shelter in my area opened in 1973 as a small volunteer-run shelter and became registered as a charity in 1974. In the 22 years since it opened its doors, it has evolved to become one of our city's leading social service organizations and runs various high-profile fundraising activities yearly including casino nights, marathon sponsorship, and a gala dinner. In addition to providing services to women and children, working in high schools on outreach programs, and managing an elderly intervention program, they also operate a highly successful

men's counseling program aimed at providing men with a safe place to work on changing abusive behavioural issues and mending families before they break apart. The shelter's approach is a holistic one that focuses on healing the entire family unit and creating cohesion and social stability.

Due to their extensive programming and socially diverse client base, volunteers are expected to undergo the same training as all new hires. In order for me to even know the location of the shelter, I had to complete three training programs at their head office which involved learning about their response-based approach. This response-based approach centers around honouring the victim, which enables them to embrace their resistance no matter how insignificant a victim believes their action may be. One example I think of often is of the woman whose husband would abuse her if the house was not in perfect order when he arrived home from work each day. Her response was to adjust the pictures in the living room so they hung slightly askew. It was innocent enough to avoid his wrath, but to her it was a concrete protest. It is the belief of the team at the shelter that the passive victim image is a fallacy and all abused people resist in ways that they may discount as meaningless, yet should be celebrated. It is only upon completion of the training programs that the prospective volunteer can select their area of interest and volunteer hours and learn where to report to duty.

Steps to Formation

Creating a resource centre is not just a matter of assembling some shelves, buying books, and hoping to change someone's life. It took approximately six months to acquire a basic collection and another month or two afterwards to find the space. The first step was to begin fundraising, because although donated books are valued, I wanted the clients at the shelter to have new books. These are women and children who may have left their homes with little to nothing and I wanted them to be able to crack open a new spine and associate the smell of book binding with comfort. I wanted them to be able to take the books with them if they so desire as they start their life outside of the shelter.

I am fortunate to work for a system that has yearly book sales, with the proceeds going to charity. It did not take much coercion to convince my peers that the shelter was a worthwhile cause, and soon after, we held two book sales and raised enough to fund a small library. With the addition of often-overwhelming community donations, which consisted of boxes and boxes overflowing with dubious fiction and outdated biographies, the library was taking shape.

Our biggest challenge was the lack of space in the shelter, and as most librarians know, this is a perpetual challenge. The shelter staff was able to clear out a small room in the basement close to the children's counselling area and daycare with a comfortable leather sofa and a tall dark oak bookshelf. This became our library, and soon enough, women and children began dropping by to offer suggestions and to ask for titles. I staffed the room every two weeks, and it was clear by the regular level of disarray that the library was used often.

In retrospect, the set-up seems so clean and easy, but there were a few challenging issues. Abused women and children are often undergoing extensive therapy while living at the shelter

(Wathen, Harris, Ford-Gilboe & Hansen, 2013). I had to be cognizant of this so as to avoid ordering books that glorified violence, domestic struggles, death, and various mental health issues. If it was purely a recipe and life skills library, that would have been easy, but I was aiming for a rounded collection, one that also included topics that could potentially offend. Collection development for novels that avoid the prior issues is not an easy task. If anyone has tried to select novels that avoid those issues, they would find themselves surrounded by a very small, restrictive collection. We also built a teen collection, which was a difficult task without including vampire/teenage angst fiction, not to mention that restricting access to information in any form goes against our values as librarians.

I worked with the counselling staff to develop a compromise. I could select a varied collection, provided that we included a large disclaimer that waived our liability in the case of potential emotional distress. The compromise also required me to balance things out with positive self-help material that promoted independent living. Researching the information needs of abused women helped develop the collection as well. According to Dunne, women often turn to informal sources of information when escaping an abusive situation, but once shelter is in place, they often turn to resources such as counselling, legal, and medical (Dunne, 2002). We aimed to create a collection that was rich in the information needs, while also providing a place where women could relax.

Another issue that arose was that of the nature of the shelter. It is an emergency shelter with a three-week limit on a stay. After the three weeks, women are expected to move into a longer term shelter or find housing. My volunteer schedule allowed me to be there for two hours every two weeks. It was difficult to form attachments and even deliver on books that were requested this way. I found that the best way to work within the confines of this schedule was to be present throughout the shelter as opposed to spending all of my time in the resource centre, especially in the children's area. For requests to have items delivered to the home of the volunteer coordinator, I ensured that some of the funds were left unspent to give me the ability to rush order books through Amazon. The children were the greatest supporters of the library, often running to ask me if I had a specific character book.

Despite the few issues encountered, our little library quickly grew in popularity, and every week I would have to replenish the shelves with all of the community donations. I also worked with the public library to provide information about the programming options for women and children.

Community Development and Volunteering

One of my favorite moments was when I was approached by two teenage girls in the shelter. I came across them sitting on the floor of the narrow hallway in the basement, painting their nails and talking to the children's counsellor. I was introduced by the counsellor and the girls immediately lit up. They began asking about books and whether we had two that they were interested in. We did not, so I immediately ordered the books and they received them a couple days later. A few days after that I received an email from the counsellor saying that the girls read the novels in a few hours and they all had a healthy cry together. This was all the assessment I

needed, and this is why we all need to give to our communities. I always said that I do not need to make a difference in the lives of many; even one change can make a difference. And we may never see the results of our work; all that matters is that it is done.

The best moments have come from the youth in the shelter. Children would come running down the narrow hallway when they saw me, and despite their best efforts, the day care providers could not keep them contained. I would often be surrounded by children clamouring for books and asking about titles. I asked if I could do a story night once the library was settled, but I was told that they were already filled with programming and overbooked with volunteers and could not accommodate anything else. Just knowing that the lives of the clients were filled with warm moments was enough, and despite the horrors many may have suffered, they still knew how to smile and take hope in small moments. As librarians, it is surprising how easily we can create effects on the communities around us by being involved. Once we are known to the people around us, we become valuable resources and are seen as trustworthy allies, and this can happen in any environment, from the grocery store to our doctors' offices. This was apparent in the way my services were utilized by the staff in the shelter. They began turning to me for research help as a way of supporting their professional practice.

In addition to the obvious connections between altruism and community benefit, there are ways librarians can impact the community by self-identifying as an information source. Every interaction with the public can be an opportunity to strengthen the concepts of information literacy. According to Hang Tat Leong (2013), outreach strategies reinforce the link between the community and the academy and can help develop a "two-way communication between the university and its communities" (p. 221). This is referred to as community-based learning and is particularly effective because it meets an immediate need that is local and current to the seeker (Eversole, 2014). When the teenage girls could not remember the author of the novel they wanted, I was immediately able to teach them a quick lesson about how to search for author and title by using Amazon. This may seem trite, but quite often people do not know how to find the information they need in a timely manner and they give up. Quite a few of the clients of the shelter were newcomers to Canada, and even a simple internet search proved to be too arduous with limited English skills and lack of knowledge about services for them.

Conclusion

Community is about being together. I remember receiving an email that called off my shift for the week because the shelter was experiencing an outbreak of the stomach flu, and I reflected that at least everyone was together in their pain, and hopefully they were able to experience some rueful humour out of the situation. That is the moment when I realized that being part of a community is both passive and active and we can choose who to populate our lives with, and I was part of something unique.

What started out with me seeking a remedy for my creeping compassion fatigue ended up bringing me into a new community. It also taught me that volunteering a skill to a community in need does not have to be a huge gesture, it just has to be heartfelt. Any honest gesture will be well received by someone. I will always remember those teenage girls. They were rough young

girls with swear-peppered conversation—the types of girls I would have feared in my youth—yet all they were looking for was someone to listen to them as individuals. Sometimes the only salve compassion fatigue needs is the perspective that allows us to see ourselves in anyone around us.

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