

The Shared Experience

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Abstract: A narrative of a small Ohio library challenging staff to make a difference in the lives of community members.

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Empowerment

My Friday afternoons are spent organizing for the next week of work. It's a difficult task. All the items I've been juggling during the week get pulled out of the circus and filed away or delegated or given a resting place for the weekend, only to be juggled again on Monday. As the executive director of a small public library, it comes with the territory. On this particular Friday, it was already dark outside and the snow was falling. The library was still packed with patrons as I was gathering my bags and locking my door. I was met at my door by one of my workers, "Oh, sorry! Looks like you're leaving for the night! Do you have a minute?"

I solve more problems with my arms loaded with bags. In the morning, before I even get completely through the door, I have my maintenance worker hustling me off to show me the newest roof leak or to investigate the odd sound coming from one of the 14 furnaces. My job title actually means "master of everything." It is an odd occurrence to make it from my office and out the door to my car without being stopped by a staff member or patron, so it is so much easier to be the very first one to arrive in the morning and the last to leave at night.

I put my things down and said, "Of course I have minute. What's up?"

My worker explained, "I have a woman at the circulation desk and she heard we were collecting food for the food pantry and asked if she could possibly get some food to last through the weekend until the food pantry opens on Monday. I don't know what to tell her."

Not to sound like a show-off but our Food for Fines library program was actually featured in a *New York Times* article in 2010. Patrons who accrued fines and lost items that exceed \$10 became blocked by our operating system and could no longer use the library. When I started as the director in 2009, my library was owed thousands of dollars in uncollected fines; hundreds of community members were unable to use the library. During that same moment in time, Ohio libraries took a hit in the state budget. Services were cut, hours reduced, and positions consolidated. Just one block over, our local food pantry was also feeling a hit. The shelves and freezers were bare, yet the demand was growing, and that is exactly what was happening at the library. We had more people through our doors than ever before taking advantage of all the free services the library has to offer. The solution? Food for Fines. For every dollar a patron owed the library, they were asked to bring in one food item. Larger fines were cut in half to make the donation reasonable.

So there I stood with my co-worker, standing face-to-face with the inquiring woman, surrounded by several large red totes overflowing with food donations, which only represented that day's haul.

The woman said she had just moved to town with her three young daughters. Her boyfriend was serving time in the medium security correctional institution and now they could visit more easily and await his reentry. She literally had nothing when she walked to the Human Resource Center and Food Pantry at 5 o'clock, as they had already closed for the weekend. A young boy riding his bike in the parking lot told the woman about the pile of food at the library.

I turned to my co-worker and asked, "Can you sign them up for library cards and pick out some books for the children?" I then grabbed some library book bags and began sorting through the food to pick out ingredients for several meals, along with treats for the kids.

After the family was on their way out the door, my co-worker turned to me and said, "I'm so glad you were still here to make that decision." And I replied, "What decision? Doing the right thing is always the solution. You can do that on your own without me."

I shudder to think what that family would have been told if I had gone home early that Friday.

Still Hungry

"I hope the fire chief doesn't stop in today," my director of youth services mumbled under her breath just loud enough for me to hear. She was right. Our meeting room was crammed with kids and parents. I stopped counting at 300; the room was zoned to hold only 100. Today was Swamp-Diggity, A Cajun Jubilee, an event held on a day off from school to give the kids in our community a safe activity and a hot meal. With no school that day, children would have struggled to find those basic necessities. Even though the event was for school age kids, and parents were encouraged to "drop and roll," they too stuck around hoping to get a cookie and a slice of pizza, which we would only offer once the kids were all fed. We always hold sign-ups to try to figure out how many to plan for, but it never fails, many more show up and we never say no.

We started our event with punch and cookies, read a few stories and did one of our famous puppet shows. It was then time to bring out the main attraction. Jungle Terry is like a super hero to kids, and he promised to further our themed event by bringing his swamp friends. Though the kids hung on his every word, eagerly waiting to see what creature would emerge next from one of the plain gray plastic totes, Jungle Terry still insisted on shouting into the wireless mic that hung around his ear like one of his creepy critters. One by one each animal took center stage: a tortoise that small kids could stand on; an American alligator that slithered and tried to escape, much to the delight of screaming children; a huge, furry and equally gross tarantula; and Ana-Banana, a six foot albino boa constrictor that patiently allowed itself to be held by several brave volunteers.

"Let's all take a seat at the craft tables for our next activity!" shouted my youth service person,

who in no way ever needs a mic.

The mob of children and caregivers surged through both exits to make their way to the crafting stations we had set up earlier. With the meeting room emptying, my job was to do a quick clean up and keep an eye out for the pizza delivery man, another perk that comes with being the director. With a few people remaining in the room visiting with each other, I surveyed the damage: clumps of dirt dug in on shoes (or possibly from one of our swamp friends), empty cups, and a few crushed cookies. Smack dab in the middle of the floor was one lonely cookie that almost survived the massive stampede of wiggling paws, claws, and feet. With my trash bag in hand I started to make my way to the cookie, and to my astonishment, a woman beat me to it. She nonchalantly stooped down mid-step and grabbed it, which was now broken in two under the pressure of God knows what, and popped one half in her mouth while simultaneously shoving the other half in the pocket of her dirty and torn sweater. I pretended I didn't see her do it and continued my cleaning while she darted out the door to join her children at the crafting table.

Empathy

Monday mornings at the library is one of my favorite times. Workers arrive, and after the morning tasks are complete, we gather to catch up with each other. Just as cliché as it sounds, we literally stand around the water cooler chatting about items purchased, meals made, and dates had or not had. With only 14 employees, we are a close group, as I bet all small libraries are. During all the chit-chat, it popped into my head that the youth department had an after-school program on Friday.

"Hey how many kids came to the after-school on Friday?" I asked one of my youth staffers. It was a bracelet-making program. The newest fad was taking impossibly small colored rubber bands and somehow twisting them into bracelets. We wanted to jump on this trend quickly, strike while the iron was hot. Get the kids into the library before we missed the trend and they were on to the next hot trinket. It is always a library programming struggle.

"Well we had 50 sign up, so that's all I had supplies for, but of course we had some crazy parents who actually sat down in a seat and started making bracelets! Can you believe the nerve of some people? How do they not get that this was a kid's event? I just don't get why grown adults act like that! I'm tired of these people always trying to get something for free. I had to scurry around and try to set up more work stations for kids and we ended up running out of supplies," complained my worker.

According to Warden Slone from the Lake Erie Correctional Institution, the number one reason people become incarcerated or re-offend is the lack of leisure skills. As a library director, this makes sense. Almost everything a library has to offer is tied to leisure activity. Keeping busy, having hobbies, engaging the mind, learning new skills, and connecting with other people in a healthy and worthwhile atmosphere all happen within the walls of the library. As librarians, we have the secret weapons to fight against incarceration. We must be sure to take every opportunity afforded to teach library use and encourage life-long learning.

Why should we limit who can learn how to make a bracelet? Why should we set age parameters on our events? Why should we narrow our marketing to certain genders? It was in that exact moment that I knew that everything we were doing was wrong. My stomach dropped and the room morphed from light and festive to dark and gloomy. It was like something out of a movie. My staff member continued to complain and blather on about "those people" who had ruined her event, but to me, she became almost a blurry blob moving in slow-mo while my mind raced to formulate a plan. We needed a new direction if we were ever going to make a difference in our community, and it starts with empathy.

Library Full of Stars

The biggest challenge libraries face today is understanding the needs of diverse patrons and translating those needs into a customer service plan. Many of us are too busy keeping our heads above the flow of the daily workload to devise plans and procedures that go beyond the checking in and out of library materials. The shared library experience is much more than that. Trying to understand what motivates patron behavior on the other side of the circ desk has led me to discover the themes that hold a key to providing teachable moments in staff development. What skills do my library employees need, and as the director, am I providing those tools?

It was time to bring in the experts. I scheduled a series of morning staff meetings that brought in speakers from agencies with whom we share patrons: Children Services, Job and Family Services, and our local court magistrate. I also began to research the concept of generational poverty. Generational poverty is defined as a family unit being on government assistance for two generations or more. My county was in the 11th such cycle. I found helpful books on the subject and made a mandatory reading list for staff. Through these small steps, my staff learned enhanced listening skills and were able to notice body language (theirs and others) more effectively, both of which helped them to engage with patrons more positively. It was all about finding common ground, but knowing how to listen, communicate, and share the experience, and being held accountable for it are two entirely different things.

Service To All Respectfully (STAR) became our employee performance theme. Library workers were going to be held accountable at their yearly evaluation based on this program I developed that created a customer service model based entirely on the concept of empathy. The program began with staff training that outlined and taught strategies for this required behavior:

Engage patrons: Both parties are sharing in the library transaction.

Ask the right questions: Listen to the response with your ears and eyes.

Show with your feet: Get out from behind your desk and walk with the patron through the entire interaction.

Show with your face: Talk with a smile and reflect the patron's emotions back in a positive manner.

Find positive ways to phrase potential negative policies and service expectations.

The design of this program also included setting measurable goals, visual reminders and awards such as star staff lapel pins and stickers that were earned as well as our STAR gallery of staff pictures.

So you might be wondering if it worked. Did I see a difference with staff? The answer is sure, I have seen improvements in some workers' accountability and motivation, but the real question is: Is the community better? The answer is that I do not know. I like to think yes, but the truth is, it will take a lifetime to see if one small change made by one small library made a difference in a patron's life.

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