

The Business of Libraries

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Abstract: A library employee harkens back to an experience from 18 years ago during a training program about safety issues for a public library. She reflects on the differences she had with the trainer about what libraries provide in terms of social services and benefits in a public space. The daughter of social workers, whose goals of social justice and civic awareness have shaped her personally and professionally, the author compares librarianship with social work, and the confluence of both professions and philosophies.

Keywords: street safe training, security, poverty simulations

During a Street Safe training class in 2000, provided by the library I was working for, the instructor, who was also our security specialist (whose job it was to monitor multiple branches and provide assistance with difficult customers and/or criminal activity in the library), was talking about possible issues that could arise. As he talked about various scenarios, it was obvious to me that they were based in mental health issues versus being behavioral problems, which is how they were presented.

I grew up in a family of social workers, with a father and mother who were professors in the field and who always served in the public sector (mostly in community and social justice arenas). As a result of my parents' influence, I naturally look beyond behavior and more towards large-scale issues like poverty, hunger, homelessness, and community and family breakdown. Given the "social work gene" that I inherited from my parents, the scenarios the instructor was providing in the Street Safe training class had me breaking down those situations in a way that probably was different from most librarians.

I shared with the class some possible responses to the "behaviors" in the instructor's scenarios. Suppose a guest in the library looked to be engaged in a conversation with what could appear to be an imaginary friend. Instead of asking him to be quiet, we could think like a social worker and notice that he could be hearing and/or seeing people; therefore, a mindful response could be: "We're letting everyone know that we need to lower our voices." One response could also be to ask the patron, "Do you have a caseworker?"

The instructor and the class seemed to laugh and dismiss my suggestions, "We're not social workers here, and if you think we should be, you're in the wrong business." I'm used to that sort of negative response; yet, I know that even after the origin of the planted seed is long forgotten, the naysaying will fade and some or all of the idea will sprout.

"We are not in any business," I responded.

I am certainly in the right profession, however. My empathy and listening skills, and my ability to communicate expectations and provide recommendations, services, and resources, have made me realize over the years that the library is the last place, the last sanctuary, for people to be

somewhere without a reason and to be a little less disenfranchised than nearly anywhere else.

Since that Street Safe training in 2000, the seed has sprouted. Library employees are being trained on assisting customers with their search for and process of signing up for city, county, and federal benefits. The training also includes poverty simulations, which give a sense of the difficulty—and the degradation—that our customers experience when attempting to access basic necessities. Additionally, library employees are participating in citywide book discussions on Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, and the library space is now being used by county departments to provide job counseling. Also, a representative from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is present weekly to help veterans navigate medical benefits and housing services.

In addition to literacy services, which include assistance with obtaining a General Education Development (GED) certificate or with English as a Second Language (ESOL), we sponsor meals for kids, book drives, food for fines, and clothing drives. If needed, we will contact a local senior center to inform them about a frail senior patron who may benefit from their services.

We are most assuredly in the business of social work! The library has similar characteristics of the thoughts Jane Addams (1912) expressed:

In the unceasing ebb and flow of justice and oppression, we must all dig channels as best we may, that at the propitious moment somewhat of the swelling tide may be conducted to the barren places of life. (p. 40)

Our roots of providing the community with resources to enhance learning remain the same; however, even among our traditional roots, the spirit of social work shines forth. We can recommend a good book or movie to a teen who feels isolated or unwelcome. For the parent who hasn’t slept in months, we can suggest a parenting blog. And to the young visitor who thinks librarians aren’t cool, we can prove our “music cred” by suggesting Childish Gambino.

We work in a profession where you absolutely never know what's going to come through the door, where being in the middle of administrative choices can be a challenge and a hardship. When electronic books were on the horizon, librarians envisioned empty shelves, digital kiosks, no staff, and fewer interactions. Some of that vision came true, but much of it has not become reality. Rather, electronic media has introduced—and in many cases reintroduced—people to books and authors, and it has brought them back to libraries with their children and grandchildren. Libraries have evolved and will continue to do so in order to survive and to keep communities connected to higher learning, information, and resources that they cannot find in any other place. That is the business I am in, and my place in that is as the child of social workers.

References

Addams, J. (1912). *Twenty years at Hull-House: With autobiographical notes*. London, England: Macmillan Company.

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