

CELEBRATING LIBRARIANS

IT IS TIME TO TELL OUR STORY AND REFLECT ON OUR SUCCESSES



BY JORGE PEREZ

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“Without librarians, a library building is merely a warehouse of stuff. It’s the librarian who makes a library what it is.”

Scott Carlson (1)

It is time to tell our story. We are a unified community. We are a strong, passionate group of people. We have a powerful history. We share supportive professional associations. We embody values in line with the public good. We strive to be of service to all our community members, whether we are serving in a public library or an academic setting. All these statements are a celebration of ourselves. Celebrating librarians and our work aligns with social media sensation Mychal Threats’ movement to focus on “Library Joy.” I met Mychal in Washington, D.C. at the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) national meeting of librarians to effectively communicate with legislators about the importance of federal funding for libraries. Mychal’s simple message has resonated with so many people. It is no surprise that communities nationwide support librarians.



The author with Mychal Threats

Librarians are Valued.

According to a survey conducted in November 2023 by Every Library Institute on parent perceptions of school and public librarians, an overwhelming level of trust is placed in librarians, coupled with a high degree of overall satisfaction with their respective libraries. Among many positive data points, one item stood out for me; parents rated 91% of public librarians and 87% of school librarians as ‘Trustworthy’, far exceeding other professions. In addition, 92% of respondents trust their librarians to select resources and to suggest books and materials that are suitable in terms of age and content. (2) These findings are an important reminder of our community’s value and trust in us during a time of surges in book banning challenges and cases of hostility towards librarians.

In another survey conducted in 2017 by academic librarians at James Madison University (JMU), undergraduate students strongly believed that librarians are dedicated, with the primary motivation being their desire to assist people. The survey revealed that 70% of students acknowledge that supporting students is a key focus for librarians. Additionally, over 80% of students agree that librarians respect their intelligence, have practical knowledge, help students learn to do things themselves, and are friendly and pleasant. (3) JMU faculty shared similar sentiments, concurring that their librarians are highly competent and provide an invaluable level of service. (4)

Human nature often leads us to absorb the chaos around us, momentarily allowing it to influence our perception of professional value and worth. Let’s recognize that these external events do not define our inherent value or how the communities we serve perceive us as librarians.

CELEBRATING LIBRARIANS

Librarians Care for Their Colleagues

On the cusp of my FLA presidency, I reflect on those who have supported me in my professional career and have changed my professional trajectory. We all participate in mentoring and empowerment practices during these times.

In early 2002, I made my way from Little Havana to the Tampa Bay area to attend library science school at the University of South Florida (USF). I was hired as a courier for the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative (PPLC) in Clearwater, FL when Bernadette Storck was Executive Director. She touched many lives, mine included. Bernadette was a key figure in Florida library history and added to my excitement in embarking on a remarkable profession. I am forever grateful to her for approving education funding as part of my employment benefits.

Later in my studies, I was a part-time law librarian thanks to Sally Waters at Stetson College of Law, who is such a wonderful soul to be around. Sally made the work environment fun, welcoming, and conducive to growth. I learned the nature of professional dedication and finding joy with your colleagues and the community we serve. Later, during my time at St. Petersburg College (SPC), Dr. Tracy Elliott, now Florida Gulf Coast University Library Dean, taught me to not be afraid to try new, innovative approaches to connect students to libraries. I will always be grateful for her encouragement to shine.



Stetson College Law Librarians, Pamela Burdett, Nick Jackson, Sally Waters, and Julieanne "Jules" Stevens, and the author

At SPC, Debbie Robinson encouraged and gave me the needed push to delve into administration and become a campus director, first at the Tarpon Springs campus and later at the Gibbs Campus. Often, the encouragement and recognition from others can fuel our confidence and determination to succeed in areas that initially seem daunting.

Gene Coppola, past Palm Harbor Library director, has been a remarkable mentor through the years. I first met him when I was an ILL courier and later reconnected years later as a campus director at SPC's Tarpon Springs Campus. He boldly reimagined library spaces at his branch and has been a key player in nurturing future generations of librarians. I hope to mirror his boldness and ability to build communities during my presidency. Gene briefly commended me after my lightning round presentation at our last FLA conference, and what I would like to tell him is that his commitment to the profession and his support through the years stimulated my self-actualization journey.

Reflecting on those who have changed our lives can be a powerful exercise. It allows us to express gratitude, acknowledge the influence they've had on us, and perhaps even inspire us to impact others positively ourselves.

Librarians Care for Themselves.

A key aspect of Mychal's 'Library Joy' movement is mental health awareness. This is the time, more than ever, to have mutual mental health check-ins. The current legislation passed has created an environment of great uncertainty and unneeded hostility. We know of librarians leaving the profession prematurely or fleeing work environments where they are not supported, have to self-censor, or make choices that are not in line with our professional and personal values.

The passion we have for our profession is the same feeling that can make us hurt during these tumultuous times. We tend to take things personally. We are committed to our craft and assisting our communities. While current times bring challenges, our passion also provides strength and purpose to persevere and make a difference, no matter the obstacles we may face. Our determination is stronger than ever.

Thanks to FLA leadership, I have gained valuable insights over the past year about the importance of balance and discernment in navigating challenges, especially in the face of media sensationalism and changing regulations. Recognizing that there's an art to knowing when to challenge certain situations and when to allow things to unfold naturally demonstrates a mature understanding of how to approach various circumstances.

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Librarians Care for their Professional Associations

As I reflect on my more than twenty years in the profession, Florida Library Association (FLA) was the initial professional organization instrumental in my career growth, offering the spaces for countless opportunities. In 2006, I attended my first FLA conference as a timid, awkward new college librarian at SPC. By the end of the conference, I felt I had found my people.

Through FLA, I chaired and collaborated on several committees, experienced library legislation day, became a regional director, and even nurtured my creative side by becoming a past conference logo designer and bookmark contest winner. FLA has afforded me collaborations with fellow state colleagues and connected me to extraordinary mentors. In fact, FLA conferences were the venues that allowed me to present my first library poster, lightning round, and solo conference presentation. Being a librarian is an awesome job. I am amazed at all the work that FLA communities are doing currently, and together with all of you, I would like to be an instrumental piece in keeping this excellent work moving forward. I know that we have the power and focus to continue FLA's mission.

My gratitude for FLA and its mission to uphold our values at this moment in time are the reasons I opted to run for office. I am going to do something radical; I will accept what is and make a mindful choice to celebrate our profession. Looking back at our past conference themes, the majority focus has been on serving our communities or how we can do better to serve others. This year is our year. We are celebrating us. Our profession. Ourselves. We are telling our story.

Call To Action:

1. Revisit the foundations of our profession. Let's not get lost in the noise. Staying grounded in our professional ethics and values is crucial, especially during challenging times. When the world around us seems chaotic or uncertain, it's essential to maintain our strong moral compass to guide our actions and decisions. Revisiting the foundations of our profession can provide us with clarity, purpose, and direction to move forward in a healthy way.

2. Reflect on our Successes. Reflection is usually something that we skip over or rarely mindfully integrate into our daily lives. Have a conversation with a colleague about tough topics and experiences. Journal. Create a list of projects and techniques that have been successful. Reflect on what has worked on yourself for self-affirmation. These practices create distance from negativity and assist in bringing out the "best you" in any situation.

3. Tell Your Story. Unfortunately, many do not fully understand the breadth of responsibilities that librarians undertake or the educational background required to enter the profession. We know that we play a vital role in society, far beyond simply organizing books, and we have a calling to make folks aware of this. During library events, presentations and orientations, let's highlight what we do. Share your story. What made you go into librarianship? Share the why of what you do to enlighten elected officials and community members.

4. Become Involved. Getting involved in professional library organizations can take many forms, from attending conferences and workshops to volunteering on committees, contributing to publications, or participating in advocacy efforts. By actively engaging with your professional community, you can stay informed, expand your network, and contribute to advancing the library profession. Please consider becoming more proactive with FLA.

5. Mentor and Build Relationships. We all have something to offer others from our experience, regardless of the length of our career. Seasoned librarians can partner with recent graduates to provide mutual fresh perspectives, insights into emerging trends, and opportunities for learning and growth for both parties. Reach out to a new hire. Create an internal program that fosters connection and growth. Building a strong support network strengthens the fabric of our professional community and creates a sense of belonging for our colleagues.

References

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