

I left my old job on a whim to uproot my life and move to a new state. As I always do when I move to a new area, I sought out the local public library first-thing to get an insight into the community and its values. Coming from a public library job, I expected that the pandemic would have affected the daily operations of my new public library just as it had done to us back in Colorado. This proved to be true as soon as I stepped foot into the Mesa Public Library (MPL) for the first time.

I was met at the door by their security guard, who took my temperature and gave me a quick rundown of the library layout once I mentioned it was my first visit. My initial observation was that the MPL had been affected more than my previous library. The layout of the library read like a one-way maze. Shelves were primarily used to block patrons from accessing certain areas, such as the children's room and the meeting rooms. Signage was scattered and at times incorrect, and finding my way around proved difficult because of this. After a few minutes I located one shelf dedicated to children's nonfiction books. Here I was met with another challenge – the library I came from used a classification system based off the Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) model. I hadn't used Dewey in quite a while, and unfortunately, there was no signage to support my browsing efforts. The all-too familiar feeling of library anxiety took hold of me, and I gave up my search and continued with my observation.

Before we continue with the MPL observation, I would like to shed light on my background and the person I interviewed for the second half of this assignment. I was a concierge at Anythink Libraries, which serves Adams County in Colorado. Specifically, I worked at the Brighton Branch in Brighton, CO - a mix of small town and rural roots with a population of around 40,000 (U.S. census bureau, 2019). Anythink focuses on customer-centered service, and that has undoubtedly stuck with me since I left. During my time there, I had the great pleasure of working with Chaz Carey, an Adult Guide at the Brighton branch. I took the

opportunity to interview her on her experiences and compare her answers with my observation reflections. Throughout the remainder of the observation, I will sprinkle in tidbits from our interview.

To start, I asked Chaz why she became a librarian. Her answer echoes my own: “I love people, and I love doing what I can to build a community”. In fact, Chaz mentions her love of connecting with staff and customers quite often throughout the interview, including how she and the rest of the staff have created new and inventive ways to continue to do so since the pandemic hit. During my observation, I wondered why the staff at the Mesa Public Library chose to work there, and how they were feeling during these uncertain times. I counted three staff in total during my visit, each quietly sat behind a large pane of plexiglass, focused on other things. I made it a point to walk past each one and offer a smile and a hello, but my gaze was never met. I needed that small gesture to begin a connection with this new and unfamiliar place now more than ever. I know their lack of engagement could be for several reasons, and I want to make it known that I do not mean to criticize them. This observation reminds me to check in with myself before work and remember why I want to be a librarian – to support my community and make people feel important and heard. If I am ever a branch manager or supervisor, it is important I do this not only for myself, but for my staff as well, otherwise negative energy has the uninvited opportunity to trickle down and affect staff and patron relationships.

When asked if she had any advice for future librarians, Chaz responded with “bring yourself and your passions into your work”. I took this to heart and tried to focus on opportunities to improve the Mesa Public Library during the pandemic, rather than treating certain instances as problems with no solutions. One of my passions is creating welcoming, equitable spaces for communities, and I can say that I see a lot of opportunities for growth at

MPL. This advice is important, especially because burnout is a real threat to public librarians and can emerge even quicker if you view circumstances through a negative lens.

The observation also reminded me how important it is to reflect the community you serve throughout the library, including through signage and within the collection, and to regularly audit your library and ask for feedback from stakeholders in order to gain perspective of how your library could improve. Especially during uncertain times such as these, the library remains one of the few places where folks can visit without expectations, so ensuring that my library is welcoming and accessible will always be a top priority throughout my career.

My last question to Chaz was this: What's a favorite program that your library has run or currently runs, and why? Since she mentioned earlier in the interview that programming is a favorite part of her responsibilities, it was no surprise that she seemed excited to answer this question. She shared "I personally love book clubs. They have been life giving during a pandemic." she continues, "I also am stoked about this immersive and experiential story telling program that a teen guide and I are working on. It will be broadcast over radio, and we are partnering with a very cool digital art company to provide a visual component to the stories." This reminds me of how important collaboration is for librarians, and how I will need to think creatively when coming up with programming opportunities, especially as technology continues to develop.

I appreciate having the opportunity to interview a former colleague and observe my local public library. I gained a lot of clarity on why public libraries remain an integral part of communities and rediscovered many of the reasons why I chose this career path as a way of uniting and supporting communities.

References

U.S. census bureau QuickFacts: Brighton city, Colorado; United States. (2019).

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/brightoncitycolorado,US/PST045219>.