

Anyone who has visited a pop-up library or bookmobile, or attended story time in a laundromat, has most likely encountered an outreach librarian. These free-range information professionals leave the library building to meet people where they are. They host brain games at senior centers and trivia nights at local bars, facilitate book clubs in jails, or put on programs at local businesses.

By providing programs and services outside of library branches, new audiences—people who may not typically use library services—are invited to participate in library offerings. “Outreach can be the megaphone...for libraries,” says Kelly Davis, community engagement librarian at the Waukesha Public Library, WI. “We can’t be a profession or institution that expects people to come to us—or eventually we won’t have a profession or institution.”

Typically, outreach librarians develop robust community partnerships to bring library programs and services to those who may not be library patrons yet. They present programs and materials geared to those who speak multiple languages at multiple literacy levels to help improve accessibility. Carian Gray, adult and senior services specialist for Prince George’s County Memorial Library System, MD, draws on her communications and customer service background. “We are advocates and ambassadors that champion libraries outside the walls,” says Gray.

And it’s as much about getting outside of traditional library service models as it is about getting outside of the physical building. Outreach engages community members in conversations to determine what they want. “Librarians tailor their services to what they think they know about a community,” says Shakema Miller, a second-generation librarian who works as the outreach and partnership specialist at Nassau Library System, NY, and is president of the New York Black Librarians’ Caucus. “Outreach is important because it allows us to test the validity of our assumptions.”

Outreach relies on relationships—with other community stakeholders as well as individual patrons. This often involves attending community meetings to identify needs and understand who is already serving the people whom the library hopes to reach. “It’s about thinking about who that community is, how to connect with the leaders, and how to have that community reflected in the branch,” explains Miller.

JACK OF ALL TRADES

“Outreach is about impact and making a difference,” says David Kelsey, outreach services librarian and manager of the outreach services team at St. Charles Public Library, IL, and president of the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach

Services. “It’s the funnest position you could have in the library because you get to do a little bit of everything—programming, partnerships, [specific] populations, and work with so many people of different backgrounds.”

There is no typical day in the life of an outreach librarian. They might start the morning at a Rotary breakfast, continue to a shelter or a senior or day care center, or pay a visit to community partners before heading into the office to refill their car with program supplies, books, and promotional material for the next day. “You have to be a jack of all trades,” says Kelsey. “Readers’ advisory, reference, carry books, drive a mobile library, or pedal a book bike.”

Outreach librarians also aggregate information about demographics, such as areas with many new parents or English language learners, and identify community needs to target programs and services to expand.

“One of the things I like to do...is to consider what barriers keep me from using the library,” says Miller. “How can

Outreach librarianship meets community members where they are, building relationships that improve libraries and lives

OUTSTANDING OUTREACH

By Erica Freudenberger

I help remove those barriers? I challenge people to think about what barriers are you creating and ask, what bridges are you building?”

Outreach workers may advocate for specific populations. For example, last summer, Julie Robinson, the Refugee & Immigrant Services & Empowerment manager at the Kansas City Public Library (KCPL), MO, shared information about the library’s summer reading program. A middle-aged Tanzanian woman approached her with a puzzled look. Robinson was concerned that she had said something offensive. She had not; Robinson learned that the woman did not know how to read or write but wanted to participate in the summer reading program. Could she make that happen? Robinson began by giving the woman a stack of Mister Rogers DVDs and set a goal of helping the woman learn to write her name rather than make a mark on documents. In her 18 years at the library, she’s watched immigrants who came for language and citizenship classes become colleagues.

Travel in all types of weather is part of the job. Outreach workers need to be flexible and able to recalibrate quickly on the fly. Gray spends time connecting with community members at schools, churches, festivals, and local events,

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showcasing all the library offers. She is currently working to connect with older residents and senior facilities. "The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the digital divide, [including] amongst seniors," Gray says. "I helped our library system develop a relationship with the Prince George's Senior Provider Network, a nonprofit organization that focuses on improving the quality of life of seniors in our community by providing resources and connecting them to agencies/organizations."

Kelsey also focuses on services to older adults, providing materials and educational programming to 300 residents each month at eight senior facilities. One of his favorite projects is fidget quilts, composed of squares that have manipulable items, for patrons living with dementia. Last December, volunteers delivered 60 quilts to the library for older patrons. "We partnered with sewing groups, quilt guilds, church groups, and others," Kelsey says. "One woman spent 12 to 15 hours creating each fidget quilt. Each one was a work of art."

INTERNAL SUPPORT

In addition to connecting with the public, outreach staff may work with other librarians. Bobbi Newman, community outreach and engagement specialist at National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM) Greater Midwest Region, helps public library staff meet the health information needs of their communities. In addition to creating a wide range of programming and workshops on health and wellness, Newman also helps libraries find funding opportunities and potential partners to assist in creating health-based programming.

Newman's support for colleagues extends even further. A couple of years ago, she noticed that many library conference attendees talked about burnout and compassion fatigue. "Library staff cannot provide excellent customer service and take care of their communities if they cannot take care of themselves," says Newman, whose research revealed the physical environment, policies, and procedures all impact library workers. "Too often approaches to staff wellness are focused on the symptoms of unhealthy practices in the workplace and offer a personal solution to what is an institutional issue," she said. In response, Newman developed a Wellness in the Workplace class and, in March, coordinated a three-day virtual national symposium. "Over 6,000 people registered and over 3,000 attended live sessions," says Newman. "It was very clear through comments and feedback shared via chat, social media, and the evaluation how cathartic this event was for library workers. For many, it was the first time they felt seen, heard, and that someone cares about them."

"I educate and connect," explains Miller, who provides services to 54 NNLM libraries in New York's Long Island. "It's an opportunity for me to share what I've learned with our member libraries—so they're aware of the needs [and] resources available—about our target audiences. It can be me educating them or connecting them with organizations that have been doing this work for years."

After the murder of George Floyd, she worked with colleagues and a local organization, Erase Racism, to create a series of programs for member library staff on equity, diversity, and inclusion. "We held a conversation on de-

fining anti-racism and a series on microaggressions," says Miller. "We had a doctor discuss the impact of racism and microaggressions on people's health—he provided the science behind it. It was an opportunity to open the eyes of our member libraries to see that we're not as equitable as we think we are and to identify areas of disconnect."

SERVICE WHERE IT'S NEEDED

KCPL has between 20 and 25 employees in its outreach department. Robust staffing allows the library to provide a wide range of services, including Books To Go, which delivers books to preschools and day cares throughout the city, and Books To Give, which provides patrons with free books at events. A mobile services bus takes library offerings throughout the city: to senior services, homebound services, and community organizations that assist vulnerable populations, such as people experiencing homelessness or living with substance abuse. The outreach department also provides community reference services, help for people looking for work, and information on developing small businesses and hosting VISTA volunteers, which allows it to expand its reach and partner with other nonprofits.

Robinson works with refugees and immigrants, providing English Language Acquisition and vocational English classes for fields such as carpentry, and coordinating citizenship classes and naturalization ceremonies. She works with local stakeholders and advocates for the community nationally, locally, and within the library. Robinson translates the material she shares—in Kansas City, the primary languages spoken in addition to English are Swahili, Spanish, Arabic, Somali, and Farsi. Library card applications are available in multiple languages, and she is working on having an audio application for patrons who may not be literate. "I also spend hours each week listening to webinars, reading articles from a large variety of agencies, going to as many conferences as possible that focus on refugees and immigrants, and studying legislature being reviewed or put into law within Missouri and in Washington, DC," says Robinson.

Miller became an outreach librarian only a couple of days before New York declared a state of emergency during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, in spring 2020. In the past year, as the pandemic waned, Miller was able to relaunch a book club at the county's jail for women who experience addiction. "I would love to expand it to include career development," says Miller, "and to the juvenile and men's centers."

In Wisconsin, Michele Gagner's position as community library liaison is shared between the Waukesha Public Library and Waukesha School District. Her background as a school librarian has made it relatively easy to bring the two institutions together, although she continues to do a lot of relationship building. "I'm constantly looking for opportunities to connect children and families, especially those identified as underserved, with library services," says Gagner. "My day-to-day duties are a combination of smaller-scale work—virtual book discussions, finding resources for teachers, doing programming with after-school and summer school wraparound sites—and large-scale initiatives—organizing all-school field trips and library card registrations, facilitating virtual visits to promote summer reading, writing grants to fund programs for Title One first grade



WHERE THE PEOPLE ARE (clockwise from top left) Prince George's County Health Connect staff member provides information on health-care enrollment to library customers at a Prince George's County Memorial Library System Health and Wellness Open House. At the Open House, Adult and Senior Services Specialist Carian Gray talks to a visitor, with staff member Andy Garcia behind her. Dana Hintz, Outreach Services Assistant at St. Charles Public Library, refills materials at a local emergency room. Amy Welch from Waukesha Public Library, r., delivers bedrolls created by patrons to Jackie Smith from the Housing Action Coalition of Waukesha County

class visits and social-emotional learning outreach kits.”

Gagner's colleague Davis works with patrons at local assisted living facilities, delivering library materials. She also collaborates with the library's makerspace coordinator on a bedroll program. “Patrons are taught how to crochet plastic bags into bedrolls” for people who are experiencing homelessness to sleep on, said Davis, who then works with local community partners to distribute the finished bedrolls.

WHAT IT TAKES

Those interested in outreach work should “have a thick skin and an open mind, and don't be afraid of making mistakes,” says Gagner. “Programming evolves; your outcome may be very different than what you planned, but can be valuable nonetheless. You can't take your losses personally.”

Outreach can seem daunting or overwhelming. “The list of obstacles is long: grappling with how to meet unmet needs, coming to terms with our profession's biases, providing services in an increasingly polarized society, an increasing number of book challenges, society's safety net seems to be especially fragile, and professional burnout,” says Davis. “Despite these obstacles, there are reasons to be hopeful—technology advances, the increasing need for community, and the general positive regard that libraries and librarians enjoy mean that we aren't starting from square one.”

Strong collaboration skills are vital, as outreach work is done across silos and in partnership with other community stakeholders. “Build your endurance,” recommends Gray. “It's a lot of work and a lot of talking. Think about who could benefit the most from your services in the community and then strategize ways to make connections.”

Thinking on your feet, drawing connections between different organizations, and finding ways to center people in the work is key to successful outreach. “Have a passion for the community that you work with, whether it is children, senior adults, or refugees and immigrants,” says Robinson. “Believe that you can make a positive difference in a person's life.”

Outreach isn't for everyone. “You have to be willing to try things,” says Davis. “It helps to be creative, easygo-

ing, willing to be uncomfortable, and interested in people's stories.”

When Gagner began, she put together a timetable reflecting the 20 hours she was scheduled to work. She quickly discarded her careful planning. “You have to be flexible, take advantage of opportunities, and say yes as much as you can,” she says. Having deep roots and connections in the community has served her well. While tabling at a school event, she spotted a woman across the room. “I went through my mental Rolodex and thought, ‘She's just become a part of the school board, and I go to church with her grandparents,’” recalls Gagner, who struck up a conversation focusing on their connections. “You either find or create a common thread. Five years later, this woman is still involved with the library.”

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

While each outreach worker's experience is rooted in the needs and aspirations of their community, the common denominator is a desire to eliminate barriers and create accessible, inclusive organizations.

Says Gagner, “Finding ways to reach community members whose needs are not being met and connect them to library services and programming has the potential to improve lives.”

As boundary-spanning institutions, libraries can amplify their impact and resources by partnering with other stakeholders. Outreach librarians are the public face of these connections, building bridges with organizations, collaborating on programs and initiatives, and providing space to convene.

“My reasons for staying an outreach librarian are many, but the primary one is being part of changing lives,” says Robinson. “What I do has a ripple effect on families, communities, Kansas City, and possibly even the nation.” ■



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