Interview

“The Everyday Art of Bringing Books and People Together”: A Retrospective Interview with Yvonne Patch

Introduction

Yvonne Patch was the Manager of Central Information Services at Hamilton Public Library (HPL). I was fortunate to call her my manager for a year before she retired at the end of 2018. Her role required her to manage a large and ever evolving staff and a loyal yet challenging patron base while navigating the waves of change in libraries. Yvonne is a strong proponent of mentorship, and she granted me an interview to take a retrospective gaze at her long and successful journey through librarianship. These lessons from a mentor at the end of an inspirational career may have value for those preparing to embark on the beginning of their own journeys into librarianship.

When your career took a turn to management, was that a vast departure from librarianship?

I think it's more managerial. I think the core things I learned at library school were focused on day-to-day work. It didn't occur to me that I would have to learn how to be a leader. The everyday art of bringing books and people together is what I thought I would be doing. The managing part was something that I took on when I was 25, and it was a bit of a learning curve. I went into this small library where people had been working for 25 years. I didn't come on as a young know-it-all that was going to make them do something that they were uncomfortable with.

A career in public librarianship can be stressful, but there are moments of reward.

Can you share a moment when you knew you were in the right place?

A few years ago, a young woman went through our security and the alarm went off. Her card was in arrears and she had tried to take magazines out without checking them out. I took her to my office and said, “How about we try to have a fresh start?” That relationship, which started 10 years ago, is still going on. If you empower people, it gives them hope to move forward. I’m not saying I saved her existence, but somebody was able to give her that opportunity to start again and do something differently. She ended up going back to school, and I would say to her, “Come back and check in with me.” If you can do that with one or two people, you can feel that you are making some sort of contribution.

That’s one thing I appreciate about HPL: the staff are empowered to empower others.

I think the other side to that: sometimes people want to have rules and have structure. It’s natural in human nature that if you veer off the path, something bad can happen to you, but I think we must be more willing to veer off that path. Public libraries are in a position where they can do that.

Was there ever a point in your career where you felt you were at a point of stagnancy or weren’t moving forward?

Once, my position was made redundant, so I started teaching at Mohawk [College], for the [Library] technician program, but I was absolutely terrified of teaching people. It was the best thing that could’ve happened to me because it broke that fear. I also ended up in a position that I wasn’t entirely happy with, installing software, and it wasn’t my cup of

tea. I knew that it wasn't forever, so I thought "I'm learning new skills." When you have an opportunity to learn new skills, that's the best thing. It's better than wallowing in the fact that it's not exactly what you wanted to do.

If you could see into the future, what do you envision the shape of libraries to be?

We're always in a position of having to reinvent to some extent. We're going to have to be adaptable to different generations. Certain demographics would enjoy talking to each other about books, but they need a space where they can do something like have a beer, instead of being in a very sterile room.

If you could give advice to yourself at the beginning of your career, what would that advice be?

Don't focus too much on your ego. Look at how you can contribute to your surroundings. There's going to be instances where you don't fit well with an organization. It's not up to the organization to solve that for you: you have to solve it yourself. I really believe in mentoring. I strongly believe you find someone that can help you use your skills in the best possible way. I had a mentor and that's what happened. I didn't agree with the new way they wanted to do things, and I took it to the chief librarian at the time. He said, "Can you come back when you have some ideas for how we could do it differently?" It was such a learning moment! It changes the whole dynamic. How would you like to see it differently? It needs to get done, so how will we go about it?

[Interview has been edited for length and clarity.]

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