PUBLIC LIBRARIES ONLINE

New Directors Reflect

by Nanci Milone Hill *on* November 28, 2016

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During the past two years, Massachusetts saw a multitude of library directors retire. These retirements opened up positions that had been filled for many years. Several of those positions were filled by young librarians who had never before held an administrative position. The Merrimack Valley Library Consortium (MVLC), a consortium consisting of thirty-six public libraries, including mine, welcomed ten new directors in the past two years. While consortia, the Massachusetts Library System, and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners rushed to welcome the new directors and provide them with additional training, they often found themselves confused and unsure of how to deal with deteriorating buildings, dwindling budgets, staffing demands, boards of trustees, friends groups, and public perceptions. Two new library directors, Peter Struzziero and Alex Lent, started a New Administrators Forum, where new directors could meet up, discuss challenges, and brainstorm solutions. This May, they held a program at the 2016 Massachusetts Library Association Annual Conference. Several established library directors, including me, were invited to attend the session to share their wisdom. Following the program, a listserv was established so that the group could stay in touch. I asked some of those new directors to share with me their thoughts and insights following their first year on the job. What follows are those experiences. I hope that you will enjoy them.

Getting Personal With Your Library

Justin Ray Snook, Director, Simon Fairfield Public Library, Douglas (MA), jsnook@cwmars.org

I first walked into the Simon Fairfield Public Library as its director on an unseasonably cold and rainy June day, sixteen days before my thirty-first birthday. I must say it was a dream come true. I'd taken a broad range of courses during library school
in an attempt to become a jack of all trades. In my previous position, I'd benefited from the mentorship of a director-turned-reference-librarian who filled me in on the nitty-gritty of the profession. I felt like I was as prepared as possible for a young first-time director with no managerial experience—which isn't saying much—but here I finally stood: taking the reins that had been firmly held for thirty-five years, in a library in which all staff members (barring the pages) were old enough to be my parents.

I spent my first couple of weeks figuring out systems. I'd never dealt with municipal accounting, ordered from book vendors, or managed a payroll, so I got crash courses on all that and more. I spent a lot of time at town hall asking people to "explain it to me like I'm five." As much as I wanted to jump in and get to know everyone socially, the first order of business was simply figuring out how to turn the lights on and keep the bills paid. Once that was done, though, the fun started. My office is right behind the circulation desk, with two doors and a window opening onto the lobby. I permanently opened them. I had each staff member give me a tour of the library and explain what about it they held dear and what they found annoying. I invited everyone in the community to drop in at any time to chat over coffee, pushed out a survey, visited local businesses, prepared a mass mailing, and generally did everything I could to establish connections and collect as much information as possible.

I learned two things. The first was that I am blessed with a very competent staff. They know how to get things done independently and are well loved by our patronage. The second was that there were many physical aspects of the library that needed sprucing up. Given the reliability with which our librarians were chugging along with day-to-day operations, I took it on myself to weed over eight thousand items, throw away a bunch of inefficient shelving, rearrange the furniture, change our cataloging templates, alter our spine labels, genre-fy the fiction, redesign the website, start a newsletter, switch all our public computers to Linux, and turn the reference mezzanine into a teen loft.

At first, people found the rapid pace of change exciting. One librarian called it a "breath of fresh air." Patrons were excited that the library was "opening up." But as the process of bringing the building and collections up to speed dragged on, people lost their enthusiasm. Too much was happening on a compressed time scale for too long. Patrons and staff started commenting on how every time they came in, something would be different. What had been a breath of fresh air became a whirlwind, and morale started to drop. I

often found myself promising that the dust would settle soon, but it didn't. And it couldn't, because I couldn't really stop reclassifying our collection once I had started. These were things that needed doing, and I don't regret doing them. But a slower pace would have been ideal.

Recovering from those first frenetic months took time. I devoted full attention to finishing what I had started, then let things settle down for a while. I spent more time on collection development and maintenance, tweaked our computer setups based on feedback, wrote up some grants, and just let the library do what it does without throwing new variables into the mix for a while. I chatted with my mentor from my previous job, who reminded me to take things slow. Institutional cultures are slow to change, especially publicly governed ones. I recalled a management philosophy I learned about in library school—the Kaizen Method—and decided to embrace it: slow and steady continuous improvement, making myself available to help staff with self-directed changes, and enabling a more organic evolution of the library rather than trying to fix everything at the same time. My knee-jerk reaction when I see something that could work better is to immediately try to fix it. I've learned to suppress that urge. Sometimes, putting things on the back-burner is okay.

The more important lesson I learned, though, is just how much the library and all its various bits and pieces mean to people. We use a lot of impersonal language to describe libraries: institutions, entities, organizations, etc. But patrons, staff, trustees—everyone involved, really—think of the library in much more intimate terms. Perhaps it is because we are a breed that by nature loves literature, but it seems to me that people have a relationship with the library that is almost personal. Everyone in town has memories and stories that involve the library. They may be from a long time ago, and not all of them are positive, but the library wends its way in and out of people's life stories. Where I see aspects of the library I would like to change, others see their grandfather's handiwork, Eagle Scout projects, childhood memories, the result of a long-fought fundraising campaign. In the last century, the library has accumulated quite a history, and I have to approach it with a degree of reverence.

Just because a component of the library represents what was once a labor of great love, however, doesn't mean it can remain forever static. This is a library, after all, not a museum. Times change, and so do people's needs. We have to change as well to remain responsive to those needs. The key is being sensitive to what must be altered, updated, or—sometimes—left behind. Ultimately, as directors, we have to break down the library into its constituent parts and analyze their inputs and outputs. And that, I think, is the biggest challenge I have faced as a new director.

On the one hand, there is the perception that the venerable library is an intrinsically valuable monument to the community's literary culture. On the other hand, there is the perception that the library is just a shared-economy business in which the estimated value of materials circulated each year needs to significantly

exceed the sum of our tax appropriation and grant income. Neither perception is wrong. They both are part of the same reality. Navigating between them brings to mind Scylla and Charibdis. Establishing a balance between those realties lies at the heart of nearly all the tough choices I have to make as director. Do I replace the hundred-year-old shelving with something more efficient or leave it for the photographers and tourists who come to admire the woodwork? Do I continue the tradition of investing in our enviable yet underused American history collection or shift those funds to television series I know will circulate?

In the end, it comes back to the community. They are the real measure of the library's output: what they read, what they learn, the inspiration they gain, how passionate they are, and how connected they feel. They are also the real measure of the library's input: what they pay in taxes, what they give on top of that in terms of time, money, and talent, and how much they participate to make the library's mission a success. When the community both gives and takes in abundance, we're doing a good job. If they are neither giving nor taking from the library, we are obviously failing. If they take little but give generously, I know I am not being a good steward of our communal resources. And if they take a lot but give little, I know it is time to up my fundraiser-in-chief game. All the choices I make as a director need to be motivated by an accurate understanding of those factors and informed by the professional expertise I bring to the table. It is humbling to be entrusted with such a stewardship, and still remains a dream come true.

New Library Directors Group

Alex Lent, Director, Millis (MA) Public Library, Vice President/President Elect, Massachusetts Library Association, alent@minlib.net

I recently celebrated the completion of my first full year as a library director. It was a whirlwind of a year, hugely fun, and wildly successful: circulation is up by 15 percent, use of e-library resources by 45 percent, program attendance by 60 percent, and community use of library meeting spaces by 450 percent. We now have twice as many Facebook likes, ten times as many Twitter followers, thriving art, concert, and local author series, more partnerships with local organizations than ever before, and—most importantly—a community that is excited about its library.

My first year was also full of challenges. I was well prepared for some of these challenges—underperforming collections, underwhelming adult programming, and unrealized potential. I was less well prepared for others—for instance, a massive facilities crisis ninety minutes into my first day on the job. And I was not at all prepared for one challenge—the passing of a long-time staff member.

I learned a lot this year, but in retrospect, there isn't some extra piece of knowledge or some extra skill I wish I had before starting my job. But there is something I wish I did have: a network of peers, a group of

library directors who, like me, were just starting out and facing some of the same challenges I was facing. Or rather, facing challenges that all library directors face, but experiencing them the way I was experiencing them: as someone new to the job.

The challenges I faced this year were made more challenging by the fact that I am new to my position. I planned my career carefully, working diligently to gather the skills and experiences that I would need to be a good library director, but there's no getting around the fact that I don't have the years or decades of experience that some of my more established colleagues are able to draw from. And neither do other new library directors.

But if we had a way to communicate—if we had a network of new library directors—we could draw from our collective experience. We could share experiences, successes, failures, frustrations. We could ask for advice, quickly spread the word about great resources or training opportunities. We could organize new professional development opportunities. We could arrange casual meet ups, Google Hangouts, unconferences, formal conferences, or meetings at existing conferences. We could arrange workshops with more established library directors to pick their brains and learn from their experience.

The day after I celebrated the completion of my first full year as a library director, I decided to create such a group. The New Library Directors Group () exists to facilitate communication, collaboration, and continuing education for library directors in their first five years on the job. I introduced the group at the ALA Midwinter Meeting. We now have nearly four dozen active members in our listserv and have hosted round-table meet-ups at the Massachusetts Library Association and the New England Library Association. In the future, we'll be posting interviews with established library directors, sharing notes from relevant conference presentations, and organizing resources of use to new directors.

The New Library Directors Group is what I wanted and needed in my first year, and it's been a big help now that I'm in my second year. If you are a new director, please join us at librarydirectors.org.

So You Want to Be a Library Director?

Peter Struzziero, Director, Belmont (MA) Public Library, pstruzziero@minlib.net

So you want to be a library director . . . are you sure? How sure? When I started graduate school at Simmons College, I told myself that management was for me. I aced the (required) management class and thoroughly enjoyed the prospective idea of not having a boss, but being the boss. I wish someone had told me that "the boss" has more bosses than employees sometimes.

That's where it all began, I suppose. After the management course, I finally had an answer to the question I

had been asked in every job interview I'd been to: "Where do you see yourself in five years?" I was going to be a public library director. Seemed easy enough: be in charge of all the librarians, manage the money, make sure the parking lot gets plowed when it's snowing. Nothing to it, right? Wrong. You've probably heard about the "Accidental Library Director." But what about the ones who did it on purpose? Here are some dos and don'ts from a young leader a mere three years into a management career.

First things first: be sure you are ready to take the leap into management. Let's review some questions that you should ask yourself.

1. Have you learned everything you need to know?

2. Have you ever read the annual report your boss and trustees put out?

3. Have you attended any Board of Trustee meetings? Do you read the minutes? Do you know the ins and outs of what is on your Directors' plate?

4. What's your experience working with other town departments, or unions? Have you sat through union negotiations, or ever been part of a grievance process?

5. How big is the budget you manage-—and how are you doing with that?

6. How about people? Are you a good manager of human resources issues?

7. Do you like meetings?

8. Here is a good one: how are you at public speaking? How about public *listening*?

Now don't get me wrong, I love my job. I am the Director of the Belmont Public Library, just outside of Boston, Massachusetts. We have a wonderful community and we are proudly one of the top circulating libraries in the state.

The community really loves its library, and the staff cares about the patrons and providing good service. It's a great place to be, and I plan to be here for a while. Looking back though, I realize I could have been serviced by more years in smaller roles and could have learned more during those years. I spent just shy of four years as a professional librarian before I accepted my first Director position, and told myself I would just "learn on the job." I am lucky that aside from a few missteps along the way, I'm doing well. I've settled into my current role over the last eighteen months (at the time of this writing) and things are going great. We have a great team and I am excited for the future. I just wish I had done a few things before I took the plunge.

If could go back, I might have waited a few more years and done a few things differently. To start, I would have gotten myself a real-deal, serious-business mentor. Don't get me wrong, I have a lot of mentors that I can turn to with issues, advice, and ideas, but I don't have the one constant, all-the-time, go-to person. I wish I did, and I really wish I had one before this all began. If you're thinking about a career in library management, get yourself a mentor. It might be an informal arrangement with someone in your county or consortium, or a connection through a formal mentoring program. Tell your mentor your plans and listen to what they have to say.

Get yourself to some library conferences. It doesn't matter which ones. Your state conference, PLA, ALA . . . any of them will help you to develop some of the skills and mindsets you are going to need when you get to that big job. Seek out the sessions being led by strong leaders and library directors. Go to some of those sessions and just listen, even if you aren't wild about the topic. You can learn a lot by hearing experts speak about building plans, union issues, managing an intergenerational staff, and especially about failure, not just successes. Heck, you can even go to a session that is meant for just managers. Just tell them you want to learn, and hear what it's like. Ask questions—they'll all be flattered and impressed with your interest.

Read, and read widely. As a librarian, you might already be doing this, but don't overlook experts from other fields. How about the monthly publications that come in the mail? Do you ever read them? Trick question, you are reading one right now. If you are reading this by chance, maybe it's something you should make more of a habit out of. There are people a lot smarter than me that write for American Libraries, Public Libraries, VOYA magazine, you name it. There is plenty to be gained by reading some of the insights contained in these magazines; again, even if you aren't focused on the topic being discussed, there are management techniques and strategic ideas that will ring through. Maybe one of the authors will strike you as good mentor material and you can begin some dialogue back and forth—email and Facebook make it easy to connect.

While we are talking about learning from others in the field, here's another idea: get involved in your library consortium or at the state level. There are library agencies and associations in your state and a million different committees that need your help and support. Pick one that speaks to you (get the okay from your boss first) and get involved. You will learn more skills and hone your experience in whatever topic the committee focuses on. When you take the helm of your first library, you are going to automatically be placed on different types of committees like these. There will be lots of meetings to attend that often take place outside of your normal nine-to-five responsibilities. Get a feel for what it's like to have that extra work and see how it forces you to manage your daily tasks efficiently. You can also get some practice saying no when you are asked for deeper involvement in that work—if it's beyond your abilities time-wise, you'll need to decline on occasion, and it's a good idea to start practicing now.

Leaping into a directorship is a big decision to make, and one that deserves planning and careful thought. I decided one day I wanted a bigger bank account, and I thought I'd test my abilities and apply for a director position. Lo and behold, I got it, and that's when my education really began. I've been lucky in that I am a hard worker and dedicate lots of hours to my job, but I know for sure that I would have been all the more successful out of the gate in my previous roles if I had planned my jump to management more carefully, and built a stronger foundation.

As we often do in life, I'll end this piece by going back to the beginning. A few hundred words ago, I said, "I wish someone had told me that 'the boss' has more bosses than employees sometimes." It might have sounded like complaining, but here is the bright side: all those bosses I'm referring to (the city or town government, the resident committees, the board of trustees, the financial team for the city/town, anyone who fits the criteria of "boss" over some part of your library work) are also in place to support you. You want to feel in your work that you have someone in charge that is willing to give you the right amount of room to operate, but also will provide counsel and guidance. It's something you yourself should strive to do for the staff members that you support now as a new director or department head, but be sure to remember that you aren't in this alone. The people above you (or to the side of you, as the case may be) that you are worried about impressing will have more respect for you when you reveal that you are young in your role, or aspiring to a bigger one, and that you'd appreciate support and oversight from time to time. "I need your help" is a powerful phrase. I wish someone had told me that when I was getting started. It serves me well these days, and it might have served me well then too. Hopefully it serves you.

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