

In Step with Library Leaders

Who I Am and the Journey that Shaped My Forever Career

“*Having a career in libraries has been deeply satisfying....I am rewarded every day for giving back to my community.*”

I have over 25 years of professional leadership experience in academic libraries. I am telling my age here because I am usually just 36. Those years would grow immensely if I told you how many years collectively that I volunteered in a library in school during grades 2-12, and then while a Senior Girl Scout, volunteering in a government library in Raleigh, as a young adult, volunteering in the public library system while in a professional position as my community service choice. I am just like McQuinn's *Lola at the Library* (2006) because I loved being at the library, reading, and doing the work, because I had access to all the books while surrounded by people who felt the same way I did about the library. My two daughters, now 18 and 21, are honorary library workers, having completed almost all of their combined 500 hours of service-learning recognition in the library during high school. Having a career in libraries has been deeply satisfying. As I strive to be a great daughter to my mother, a sister, wife, mother, auntie, colleague, achiever, overcomer, and sometimes a magician, I am rewarded every day for giving back to my community. It has been a constant in my identity.

I received a blessing when I moved to Louisiana with my husband while I was participating in a seminar with Spencer Johnson and his 1998 business blockbuster, *Who Moved My Cheese*. Reading that exact book at that exact time in my life helped me to understand that having to leave North Carolina, where I had been most of my life, was a huge opportunity to really do something I loved. My “cheese was moving,” and I had to adapt and move with it. This quick read was a catalyst that showed me I had to adapt to create the life I wanted by choosing to do work that was more meaningful to me. It was

then, 25 years ago, as a child bride, that I realized there was a place called “Library School” after volunteering in the public libraries of East Baton Rouge Parish and meeting new friends. I remember being in school at Louisiana State University (LSU) wondering “What am I doing?” I also remember my family and friends asking, what are you studying? It was all new to them, and to me. It wasn't until I spoke with my husband's best friend that I realized the greatness of the new degree and the significance that I had embarked upon. He asked, “Are you going to library school?” As I replied yes, I was a little worried about what he would think. He quickly assuaged my fears by saying loudly, “Librarians ROCK!” (I agree, just like their paraprofessional partners; they are the greatest, too!) Standing, he bent his 6'4" frame to slump over an imaginary laptop, like Schroeder, a character of the *Peanuts*, playing on his beloved piano, and stated, “Those are the people who type into the computer, go to the stacks, find all kinds of stuff, and make school worthwhile. They never give up and make sure you understand what you are doing.” Then he straightened up and said, “That is all right!” No matter where I have been in my journey, he has always been in my corner, talking about the wonderful librarians he encountered while attending East Carolina University, where he received degrees that catapulted him into the many businesses he owns and runs today.

In a four-part series for this column, I will outline and discuss what is needed to become a shining example of a library worker, professional or paraprofessional, and how to become a leader in this industry. I'm letting you in on several secrets to give you a head start on the lessons I learned from more than 35 years of leadership. I want to share what some

consider inside information, gained as a leader, from experience with some of the best professional development that money could buy while working at a couple of Fortune 500 companies before coming to librarianship. To me, being a librarian has meant everything. My journey took me from earning an Economics degree at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NC A&T), to the School of Library and Information Science at LSU, then to Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC), my first professional employment and leadership position secured before I finished library school. I served there as leader and Dean for more than 16 years and then back to my alma mater, NC A&T. I can say that I have met many wonderful people along the way that positively shaped this journey.

The knowledge I impart will help anyone who wishes to understand more about *becoming* a librarian leader and to gain a better understanding of how librarianship can be a dream come true, as it was for me. This includes helping you create a leadership toolbox to gain experience. Please allow me to give you a quick outline of the things that we will discuss in the following issues of this column. I will provide a booklist or a few articles for each session, a QR code for feedback and assessment, and a way for you to ask questions that I can provide feedback on in the next issue.

What We Will Learn and Practice Part I: The Road to Understanding your Leadership Style and How it Begins with Education

I want to help guide you through the profession and show you some shortcuts, so that you know, wherever you are in your career, how to pivot and what you need to do once you have chosen this profession, or want to move forward in it from any point. What does a librarian or a paraprofessional do today? What do you need to think about how literacy, technology, the introduction of AI, research, and organization impact lifelong learners? We can also break down the types of leadership styles that exist, as discussed by Peter G. Northouse in *Leadership, Theory and Practice* (2021). We will look at information and examples that further support your learning so that you can find your calling or expand it.

What We Will Learn and Practice Part II: Support for the Culture of Librarianship

Bringing in notes from my tribe, from all walks of the library and other industries, to support your journey in understanding the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, and how to build your network, is crucial to understanding your engagement style and how that will work for you. It will be essential to know how to volunteer for the best assignments, where to go, and whom to ask when building skills critical to gaining experience. You will learn how to prepare for an interview by understanding what library leaders are looking for, preparing for what happens during your first professional job interview after you finish school or earn your certifications, and taking the first steps once you have secured the position.

What We Will Learn and Practice Part III: Keeping up Appearances

Information about paid and unpaid internships will be provided, along with a showcase on how to travel for professional development, how to prepare and present at conferences, how to understand strategic priorities, how to begin accreditation practices, how to read budgets, and how to begin grant writing. Jim Collins's *Good to Great* (2001) will be a great start in our discussion for how to hire the right people and recalibrate those who are not fearful to moving as you work on their skill sets, to having to fire those that may not be in the right seat on the bus and refusing to recalibrate, when you are allowed to hire for an open position. Having a better understanding of project management 101 from start to end is always helpful to leaders.

What We Will Learn and Practice Part IV: Run of Show

You will learn how to handle others when differing opinions and experiences can stop the process in its tracks, with the understanding that it takes all of us working together to be successful in meeting the needs of our communities. Because librarians and paraprofessionals shape communities and empower learning for everyone, we are all lifelong learners. I absolutely love what I do and am excited to impart this knowledge to you and to have an avenue to open

a dialogue through the *North Carolina Libraries* journal. It is my life's breath, and I live to support those by reaching back because of so many who did it for me.

I am including a QR code for those who may have additional questions I can answer, or for feedback and discussion. Please feel free to use it to respond or reach out. I will be sure to answer any questions posed and provide feedback on each practice part. Let's learn and work together!

Author Note

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QR Code: Article Evaluation Survey

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