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## Why We Are Librarians

By **Michelle Caulk**

*Reprinted from an article titled "Can't Help Lovin' That Job of Mine," in the summer 2003 (volume 3, no. 2) issue of the Shy Librarian, a now defunct quarterly magazine.*

I was sitting at my desk, which is in a practically windowless room, stuffed between the staff mailboxes, high school yearbooks, and quietly moldering city directories. The day outside was a depressing winter gray. As I sat contemplating a complete career overhaul (surfing instructor in Hawaii came to mind), I received a phone call from one of the members of the local newcomers' club. I had recently presented to the group during one of their luncheons about what was new at the St. Charles Public Library, where I am the Electronic Services Librarian. The woman on the phone asked me to participate in the local middle school's career fair, because I was, according to her, "not exactly what we pictured as a librarian—you're so enthusiastic, tall, blond and young." I was pretty amused by that statement because not many of my librarian friends and colleagues fit the frumpy, bun-wearing, bespectacled, finger-wagging, shushing stereotype. Well, they *do* wear comfortable shoes.

Thinking that this would be a prime opportunity to ensure that I wouldn't be the only employee left at our library when the others retire in the next decade, I agreed to introduce the students to librarianship. After hanging up the phone, panic set in. What would I say to these kids that would make them excited about what they probably perceived as a life of stamping books and hawking dusty classics to reluctant readers? I decided to call on the expertise of the thousands of library professionals on the PUBLIB listserv. I posted the message with the subject heading, "Why I Love My Job" and I asked the members of the listserv to put aside everyday trials and tribulations, and tell me their top reasons why they love being a librarian. The results started pouring into my email inbox, and I felt my small cubicle walls expand instantly, allowing me to see past the piles of library journals, book reviews to be read, lists of things to do, and chocolate candy wrappers.

The library profession has had assaults on many fronts lately, including Internet filtering, the Patriot Act, lack of funding and so on. However, one reply helped put it all in perspective; it is not just about the battles that we fight today. Mary Pergander of the Lake Bluff Public Library called librarianship, "...a calling. It is the means of fulfilling my personal life mission." On a similar vein, Karen Bary of the Westminster Public Library said, "I've always cared about censorship and intellectual freedom issues, and view myself as one of the guardians of a free and democratic society." Our reach as librarians truly go beyond the bricks and mortar of our buildings, as one librarian noted: "I am one link in the long chain of equal access and opportunity for all Americans, that stretches back to the founding of our country."

The response from Penelope Klein, of the Chester County Library System, was particularly spirited: "I just feel at peace with the work. The struggles over funding, intellectual freedom, and CIPA are challenging, and I wish we were more appreciated. However, we must work to change those attitudes. I just feel so honored to keep the doors of information access open, and to be an advocate for a person's right to the information. I can't imagine doing anything else for a living."

The timeless problem of librarians not being paid for our worth was momentarily relieved by Edythe S. Huffman of the Indiana State Library with her enthusiastic reply: "You get paid to find answers to questions! You get paid to put things in their proper place (i.e. shelving, organizing a new group of things; display, making a new collection)." Another contributor summed it up; "The almighty dollar is not my bottom line. I need funding to do my work, but customer satisfaction is a better measure of success than how much I have to spend per patron."

All librarians thrive on the verbal or non-verbal feedback that we receive from patrons for the services that we provide. Eric Norton replied that gratification is seeing a child (or any patron for that matter) smile when he hands them exactly the book they were looking for, even if all they could remember was that it was green and had an elephant in it. Norton also revels in telling a patron some fantastic fact about the library (they can check out 100 books, our programs are

free, yes, we have graphic novels, etc.) and watching their eyes bug out of their heads. Lynn Schlatter of the Shreve Memorial Library said, “I teach beginning computer classes. Senior citizens treat me like a goddess.” One of our colleagues has had people literally hug her because they have finally found the information they needed. We are truly power brokers, as one librarian commented, “On the grand scale, I love libraries because they have the tools to give people power in their lives.”

Another librarian enjoys her part in dismantling the old librarian cliché. She wrote that people are often surprised that anyone young would ever want to be a librarian, and that the “typical” librarian, contrary to stereotype, is a fun-loving person who just wants to help patrons find what they need from the library. A career involving libraries isn’t just all about external glitz and glamour, though. One person pointed out that librarianship is a wise career choice for those of us who thrive on helping people or extending kindness.

Librarians are, contrary to popular belief, very people-oriented. The opportunity to meet interesting people of all ages and experiences was one of the best aspects, according to one reply. Another reason to love our jobs was that we get to work alongside some of the most generous and intelligent people in the world.

Laurel Goodgion shared the insight that she valued most of all being part of the solution, instead of part of the problem.

Personal satisfaction was a common element in the replies. As one post said, “I get to indulge my sometimes insatiable curiosity to try and find the answers to the questions I have and that I’m asked. I inevitably get curious about things when people ask me questions and drive myself nuts trying to find the answer.” Along similar lines, Merry Luskin of Oakland, California, replied, “I love the hunt—it is so exciting and creative and brain-stretching to locate information. I get to use my whole self—all the odd interests and bits of information that I pick up are useful.” One of the many benefits of being a librarian included growing as an employee and as a person in the same place.

Many responses remarked on the wide variety of tasks that librarians do every day, including reference, public relations, storytelling (while wearing a silly fuchsia hat), being a computer guru, and acting as an amateur psychiatrist to those in need. Jenny Ur, cataloger at the Anderson County Library, said, “I get to see so much cool stuff. I might have 12 copies of *Green Eggs and Ham*, a DVD of *Time Machine* with the lovely Guy Pearce (and yes, that librarian rocked), and a colorful book on sushi on my desk at one time.”

Many library school students, when asked why they decided on attending library school, simply say that they love books. This is still the case when we’re full-fledged librarians, as one enthusiastic person said, “I love being a librarian because I LOVE books! I love the way they look, smell, and feel. I love to read the words in them and even to speak them aloud just because of the way they feel on my tongue. I love the illustrations, the photographs, and the print in books—and I love sharing my love of books with others!”

One librarian enjoys the sense of order at work that doesn’t always exist at home. I, too, have to admit that my personal collection of books is not in anything even approaching Dewey Decimal order. I’m lucky if they are even shelved in the bookcase at all, and not stacked up on the night stand, coffee table, or kitchen counter.

Although I have not had the chance to wear a bright pink hat to work yet, the result of the posting to the list was reassurance that we really are all in this together. My feelings of professional burnout dissipated as I read the reasons why I do love my job. Thanks to the thoughtfulness of my colleagues out in library land, I now feel prepared to meet a classroom full of restless 8th graders. I plan to tell them that a career as a librarian in the 21st century is one that is incredibly interesting, diverse, and always exciting.

## Resources & Web Sites

Barnett, Andy. *Libraries, Community, and Technology*. McFarland & Company, 2002.

“Me? A Librarian?!” video. [www.olc.org/pub\\_catalog.asp](http://www.olc.org/pub_catalog.asp).

“Ask Me Why I Love My Job” buttons. [www.pla.org/ala/pla/projects/publiclibrecruit/recruitmentbutton.htm](http://www.pla.org/ala/pla/projects/publiclibrecruit/recruitmentbutton.htm).

“Ten Graces for New Librarians.” [www.well.com/user/ladyhawk/albany.html](http://www.well.com/user/ladyhawk/albany.html).

“Become a Librarian: Make a Difference @ Your Library.” [www.becomealibrarian.org](http://www.becomealibrarian.org).

“Become a Librarian: Brochures.” <https://cs.ala.org/@yourlibrary/njbrochures.cfm>.

“Top Ten Reasons to Become a Librarian.” [www.lovetoteach.com/top\\_10\\_reasons\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_librari.html](http://www.lovetoteach.com/top_10_reasons_to_be_a_librari.html).

