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Featured Commentary—Sally in Libraryland

The People Who Make Our Lives Better

By Sally Decker Smith

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You may wonder how I can be so sure I love your job when we've never met. Until a couple of years ago, it would not have occurred to me that it was possible, either. But I've noticed that the universe has a way of smacking me in the face with things I need to learn, and as time goes on, I've learned to pay attention. If you want to know the circuitous path I took to get here, look for me at a social function, or keep an eye out to see if I'll be presenting this program anywhere near you. It's kind of like Star Wars—it's a whole long story, and this is the middle episode you get first.

There are people out in the community whose jobs are universally acknowledged to be important. Firefighters. Police officers. Doctors, nurses, paramedics. Teachers. People without whom society as we know it would cease to exist. Here are a few more of the million others who make my list: the French fry kid at McDonalds. Newspaper delivery people. Babysitters of all sorts. Shoemakers.

While they are not the best things for me—ok, maybe not even good for me—about once a year I really, really crave McDonald's French fries. And at that moment, I am profoundly grateful that there's somebody willing to wear a hairnet and a uniform, and spend a shift over a hot fryer just so people can have French fries any time they want, and I hope they're taking pride in their work, and feeling good about providing something people want and need. I doubt that they know exactly how much feeling is behind my "thank you." I'm grateful that somebody gets out of bed before dawn all year round, and does whatever it takes to get the newspaper to my door so I can read it before I go to work. That high school kid who gave up an occasional Saturday night so I could have an evening with no one making any demands on me beyond "What kind of dessert should we have?" was grossly underpaid when you factor in the responsibility for keeping my children safe and happy. I'm so thankful that there are people who know how to keep my favorite shoes from premature death.

There are actually few people out there who are not on my list. Whatever would we do without people who are willing to drive horrendously smelly trucks to places the yuckiness of which I cannot imagine, just so all the rest of us don't have to live amid our own debris? I'm grateful for sanitation workers, and the people who operate the diaper services. Name any job—I'm grateful someone is doing it.

A couple of years ago, our page supervisor held a poetry contest for the pages. We collected donations for a gift certificate for the winner. With the permission of the author, Julie Fisher, here's the winning entry:

We push, we lift, we sort, we shelve.

We labor day and night.

We clean up videos and books with not an end in sight.

The Pages' jobs seem thankless,

Without prestige or rank.

Do not forget, without our work,

Your search will come up blank!

We—nearly all of us—don't think of our jobs in big enough terms. Julie gets it. In an odd quirk of one career field, most surgeons get it. But do you get it? Whoever you are and whatever you do, I submit that unless thumped on the head, we usually don't assign the proper importance to what we do. Maybe that's why—because it's what we do. Day in, day out. If I performed CPR on somebody, I'd know that was an important thing. It took me years to realize how excruciatingly important every single thing I did while raising my daughters was. Consider, for a moment, the consequences of thousands—no, millions—of people throwing food. Those silverware skills are essential to a civilized society, and by making sure my daughters had them, I was making a contribution to that society every time I almost unconsciously chose foods that would stick to the spoon until they got the hang of the utensils thing.

Who stamps date due cards at your library? Do they understand that without those cards, patrons often don't remember when they're supposed to bring things back, and that most of them *want* to bring them back on time? And that when things are back on time and then back where people can get at them, MORE people can benefit from whatever that book or video holds? And who puts the pockets in the books for those cards to go into? And who does whatever processing is needed to get new materials ready to circulate? And who makes sure they can be found in whatever catalog you're using? Without every one of those people, we'd cease to function. And functioning public libraries are essential to a free society—just ask people who don't have them. So whoever stamps those cards is helping to keep us all free, and I say we salute them!

And let's salute children's staff—under sometimes combat conditions, they relentlessly instill a appreciation of reading into children far too young to understand how story time will have an effect on their ability to read in a few years, and to succeed in school, and to do well at whatever jobs they take. And I for one hope that the people dispensing my medications in the Home for Over the Hill Librarians when I'm 112 can read really, really well.

Look around your library, and see how invaluable everyone on the staff is—who calls service when the copier dies, replaces the toilet paper in the restrooms, shovels snow, plans programs that bring people in and publishes things that tell people what the library has? Could your library function without them? There is no doubt that directors and department heads are important to a library. But when we talk day-to-day impact on the people who walk through the doors, it becomes obvious how important other jobs really are. I once walked out of here on a Wednesday night, assuming life would be as it always is, and fully expecting—without even thinking about it—that I would be here the next day. But a real life emergency came up, I didn't darken the door for two weeks, and was sporadically present for the next two months. And guess what? My department kept going just fine. But if the same thing had happened to Marilyn Glass, reference paraprofessional extraordinaire, we would have been reduced to a whimpering puddle of overstressed, ineffectual, toner-splattered non-functional reference librarians, alternately babbling and barking at patrons. Can anyone really say Marilyn's job is less important than the Director's? I can't.

What about your Board members, if you have them? These people are unpaid, and they still keep showing up, and doing their best to help. Don't forget the people who arrange for Continuing Education at all kinds of places so we keep up with things we hate (in my case, technology) and things we love (the written word!!). The people who arrange conferences, and publish all manner of things that help us in our jobs and our lives. The wonderful people who took away my avocado green bathtub. Everywhere I look, there are people to whom I am so grateful that all the chocolate in the world wouldn't be enough to thank them all.

So what do we do about this? We can't pay everyone what they're worth—the economy just isn't set up to survive that. But we can take a microsecond to appreciate everybody's contribution. I firmly believe that what goes around, comes around, and I'm making sure as much good stuff as possible is out there, so with any luck some will land on me. When I distribute paychecks in my department, I say "Thanks for all your hard work," so they know they're getting more out of this than money—because I know they're putting more into it than time. I say "Thanks for making it so easy" to anybody at the other end of a phone helping me with anything. I write letters to compliment twice as often as I complain. I once delivered some Valentine chocolate to a very startled crossing guard in the neighborhood near my health club. (I've seen her every day for years, in all the weather there is, getting other people's kids safely across the street—why are we all not thanking these people every single day??) Sometimes people are startled—and sometimes suspicious. But mostly they smile. And it makes my day better, and their day better, and maybe they'll do something equally silly but demonstrative for someone else.

I challenge you—thank someone you ordinarily pay no attention to, and see what happens. And see if maybe the incidence of other people appreciating you increases at the same time, because what's going around *is* coming around. You could let me know how it goes at ssmith@itpld.lib.il.us. In any case, I am quite sure the world will be a better place. And I will continue to be grateful for all of you who are making libraries such wonderful places to be.

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