



Helping the next generation

The role of a children's librarian

One of my most enjoyable tasks as a children's librarian is guiding storytime with young children. The joy on their faces, and their engagement with the story are truly rewarding aspects of my job. However, when I completed my studies in librarianship I never imagined I would work in this field. Like other library graduates, I applied for any available library work, and when I wasn't successful, any other work I could find! I started out as a teacher aide before filling in as a library clerk at Griffith University. I then moved to a librarian position in a government library. I stayed there for seven months until I found my first permanent position at Somerville House, a private girl's school in Brisbane.

Librarian positions in schools, unlike teacher-librarian positions, are quite rare. At Somerville House I discovered a world beyond what I had always considered 'library work'. Yes, I was responsible for core library tasks such as reference services, collection maintenance and the occasional circulation tasks. But, I was also responsible for new tasks including displays, student library groups and the co-ordination of special events such as Children's Book Week. It was not unusual for staff and students to find the library transformed into Narnia or Middle Earth and all library staff dressed as elves! It also wasn't unusual for students to parade through the library as their favourite storybook character or to take part in a hula hoop competition amongst the books. After two and a half years at Somerville House, I knew my passion lay in children's services. So, it seemed a simple step to apply for the new position of children's librarian in the exotic location of Cairns.

The transition from a school library to a public library was not as smooth as I anticipated. I entered an organisation that is innovative, ground breaking and energetic. According to the latest community survey, Cairns Libraries is now the second most important service in Cairns City Council. As Cairns Libraries' first dedicated children's librarian, a lot was expected of me! I needed to create exciting new programs and build upon existing ones, in order for the library service to become a lifestyle choice for children and young people. I had to work in eight branches, not focus on a single library as I had at Somerville House.

In my new role, it was important to draw on attributes I didn't realise I pos-

sessed. One was flexibility. As a children's librarian, I needed to juggle storytimes with school tours, and meetings with bookseller visits. And I still had to find time to plan for the next school holiday program! I also learned to adjust my focus from task to task. I needed to jump from making monkey masks one minute, to organising invitations for a conference the next.

I learned to be flexible in my approach to projects. If one avenue closed, I changed my approach to look at it from another angle. Sometimes I changed my approach again and again until a project was achievable. This was particularly evident when organising a young people's literacy section in the Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA) conference program. Many weeks were spent organising this session and liaising with speakers and the QPLA committee. I learned it is important to never give up. There is always another path to pursue.

Another skill a children's librarian needs is to be proactive. I overcame my natural shyness to approach authors, schools and other library professionals. At first I found this difficult but I soon discovered that when it came to young people's literacy, other people were only too happy to be involved and assist in any way. Through these contacts, I sourced suppliers for children's indigenous products and speakers for the QPLA conference. I even began a partnership with Trinity Bay High School through a professional development opportunity. As my connections grew, so did my knowledge of what was available and what could be achieved in children's librarianship. For example, I will soon be using these connections to launch the Cairns Libraries' children's website 'The Kid's Fishing Hole', a children's library card and our library mascot 'Dewey'. The opportunities can be endless!

Perhaps the most important attribute a children's librarian needs is simply a passion for children and young people's literacy. You have to enjoy being amongst young children and teenagers. If you do, the rewards are fantastic! Not only will you meet authors, organise fun activities and purchase beautiful books, you will actually make a difference. You will introduce the next generation to the wonderful world of literature and that is the greatest reward of all. ■

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...gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column coordinator, Kate Watson, kwatson@usc.edu.au.