

Andy Woodworth

If you're a librarian that doesn't actively engage in any kind of political advocacy, then you suck.

That seems a bit harsh, right? A sweeping generalization that seeks to unreservedly shame librarian peers into doing something that I think they should be doing. It's short enough to be casually cast off as a provocative tweet, one that seeks to curry favor with other politically savvy librarians while irritating, well, everyone else. Overall, it's a pretty lazy sentiment that does not promote nor suggest action other than "do political things".

But, if you sit and think about it long enough (and I have), a speck of truth resides within that supports such a conclusion. This honest iota is about continued and secure funding, and I'm going to torture an armed forces metaphor to prove it. "An army marches on its stomach" is a phrase attributed to Napoleon, and the core of this sentiment revolves around keeping a force supplied. Whether it was Ghengis Khan, Richard I, Erwin Rommel, the supply line is the vital apparatus that keeps an army with food, water, ammunition, and shelter for campaigns or deployments. Without it, the effectiveness of the forces diminishes as troops are forced to meet those needs themselves or go without.

Your library's funding is your supply line. It keeps the building lights on, heat and AC in the vents, books and movies on the shelves, and a paid staff to maintain and assist your respective community. Without proper funding, a library goes without the elements that aren't absolutely vital to operation (reduced materials, reduced staff, reduced hours) and library effectiveness (aka the 'make a difference' factor) is diminished accordingly. From there, things fall apart at a pace directly related to how long the institution can function on reduced budgets without succumbing to financial collapse.

That's a pretty dire picture, right? That a library doesn't typically die from one giant budget cut, the proverbial financial axe that disembowels the institution in one tumultuous swing, but that it dies from a constant fiscal pruning where less intrusive snips and nicks keep the monetary wounds open and hemorrhaging. And by death, it's a fate far worse than turning out the lights and closing the building but becoming a shadow of what the library once was in the community, a wisp of its former

self in terms of stature and impact. Libraries don't die when they close; they die when they fade from their place in the community tapestry.

Political advocacy is one of the most basic overlooked needs for a library. And it's not rocket science, either. It's about establishing and maintaining good social relationships with the funding body, be it elected officials, taxpayers, college and university administration, or grant organizations (to name a few). At a minimum, this is basic communication between you and that other party. It's a report, a thank you note, a regular face to face meeting, invited tours, or any number of simple ways to share what you do with that other party. You don't even have to like them; you just have to relate that funding is important because it lets you/staff/the library offer "X, Y, and Z" good things to the service population. It's about demonstrating that what you are doing is a mutual benefit to them; that in doing good, you are making them look good.

In the ten or so years I've been in the library world, there has always been a segment of the professional population that has resisted any sort of entry into the political realm. It's built on a couple of false notions. First, that libraries are politically neutral territories, the Switzerland of institutions, and any activity by librarians will jeopardize it. I agree that librarians should be politically neutral when it comes to the curating the collection and assisting people, but that's about it. Librarians should be advocates for the library in the political arena, be it ballot measures, bond initiatives, or budget referendums. To stay silent is institutional suicide and forgoes the fiduciary duty of the librarian to their community to continue to offers services and materials. How is your silence the best way to serve your user base? It's not.

Second, that the effort of political advocacy is not worth it or don't have time to do it. To the former, I can only presume that these people were once children who never asked twice for a cookie, toy, or trip to their favorite place. Quite frankly, it's a cop-out of the worst kind in which the mental math always adds up to "no" rather than ever trying to attempt. While some contexts may prove it true, I'm willing to bet dollars to donuts that most are not. As to the latter, I am aghast at the irresponsibility of such a sentiment. If you do not make time now, you will never

make up that lost time when it counts in the face of a budget resolution or ballot box. It is the small efforts now whose ripples go onward into the future and ensure that there is a library then as there is now.

Third, that you can't do it because you are a government employee. While you do have certain restrictions on what you can say in your official capacity, you have not surrendered all of your First Amendment rights. You can still write and talk as a private citizen and communicate your librarian ideals to elected or appointed officials. I understand that local politics may make even that difficult, but it doesn't prevent you from reaching out on a county, state, or even national level. You can still take action that can influence the broader conversations about libraries. It does make a difference.

Getting back to the start of this commentary, I do believe that people who brush aside political advocacy on behalf

of libraries and librarians do so at their own peril. Not only do they put themselves at risk (be it reduced hours or layoffs), they put their communities at risk of losing vital services and materials. Political advocacy isn't just for your benefit, esteemed reader, but for the people who walk through the doors, sit at computers, read in lounge chairs, and otherwise find succor and purpose within the library walls. These are the steps you take today to ensure a better tomorrow.

Now, go and get on it. Write. Talk. Ask around for help. There are organizations (like EveryLibrary) out there to help you make that connection. You are not alone in your efforts nor your journey.

So, please, pretty please: don't suck.

Read more by Andy Woodworth at agnosticmaybe.wordpress.com