

Libraries: Guardians of Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Libraries offer safe (and brave) community spaces—places where neighbors can express and amplify their voices. At a perilous time when the library profession confronts overwhelming trials, citizens* isolated after years of a devastating pandemic and disheartened by a contentious election have turned toward libraries—a place to seek refuge, reconnect with friends and neighbors, and work together to address common concerns. During the pandemic, librarians showed up for them, turning outward and deepening relationships with local communities. Now, faced with local, state, and federal challenges, librarians must galvanize those same citizens to show up across America as a bulwark in defense of democracy and their most cherished liberties—manifest locally through their libraries.

Libraries: A Community Gem

My local library reopened after reconstruction on the Sunday following Election Day, and I panicked, worried that no one would join the celebration. After all, residents—many discouraged by a contentious election—might withdraw and stay away. As a library trustee in Highland Park, New Jersey, over the last four years, I weathered the aftermath of a divisive debate over a program featuring the author of the children’s alphabet book *P Is for Palestine*. Not long after, the library director retired. A new appointee brought hope, but COVID shut-downs came just a few weeks later. Even though the library reached out during the many months of the shutdown, remote delivery proved no substitute for on-site services. Reopening arrived just as Hurricane Ida hit New Jersey, inundating the library with a devastating flood. Following another eight months of closure with remote-only services, the library reopened just as the state library announced a much-needed renovation grant, requiring a third shut-down in less than four years. Another new library director sought temporary quarters. After four and a half years of being mostly closed, no one knew what to expect when reopening day finally arrived.

Yet, over one thousand residents from our small town of fifteen thousand joined the excitement. Crammed into the library’s refurbished meeting room, residents gathered to hear local politicians praise the new facility and tell library stories. Even as the welcoming session broke up, young and old continued to stream in. Children delighted in games and climbed aboard the town’s new fire engine parked outside. Reluctant readers relished reading to Daisy, the proud therapy dog. Adults swayed to local bands and sampled an international cookie bar

* For purposes of this discussion, it is helpful to define the term “citizens,” which is used in its historic sense—all the people who live in a city, village, or community. They are the demos or collective citizenry in “democracy.” The term is not used in the narrow, legalistic sense (Mathews 2019, 4).

donated by local restaurants. Everyone marveled at their first real opportunity to celebrate the fellowship of their neighbors after so many long delays. I savored reconnecting with many fellow citizens, some not seen for years. Indeed, the occasion elicited overwhelming joy from local residents, separated for so long by the pandemic and reeling from the aftermath of a contentious campaign. As an ardent champion of community engagement, I applauded the excitement of so many citizens who shed their loneliness and embraced the feeling of wholeness after so many years disconnected from each other.

By reimagining our space, we also reenvisioned our role in the community. Extensive engagement with community members during long closure periods paved the way for this revival. New leadership and remote services necessitated fresh relationships that spanned boundaries well beyond the traditional. Our librarians found novel ways to connect by rebuilding trust and developing a newfound appreciation for community building. As a facilitator of the library's community conversations, I uncovered much about our town, discovering we live and work in a place with many different stories—stories that sometimes conflict and require empathy to move forward together. Our board used the opportunity to revise key policies related to selection, reconsideration, conduct, exhibits, and displays in preparation for facing the kind of challenges proliferating throughout the state. To reinforce our commitment to the freedom to read, we unanimously voted to become a Book Sanctuary, proudly joining many libraries and towns in New Jersey and the nation.

Turning Outward

The reopening of the Highland Park Public Library epitomizes the best of the relationship between libraries and their communities. The physical space invites hope and fellowship in a society plagued by loneliness and alienation. Libraries like ours offer safe (and brave) spaces to exchange views and values, as recently affirmed by Pride Center members who rallied at a recent library board meeting with overwhelming support for several challenged young adult titles. When libraries turn outward to their communities, they advance not only an informed but also an engaged citizenry—essential to a strong democracy. In the era of fake news, libraries teach citizens how to seek truth. In the age of heightened censorship, libraries defend the freedom to read, view, and listen. In this uniquely inclusive civic space, citizens in a diverse community exercise their freedoms together. For democracy to flourish, libraries must step up and offer citizens free and open access to ideas. The salient tension of our times stems from those barriers that deny citizens their full information rights—barriers that libraries, like those in Highland Park, overcome. Their stories become our stories through a reciprocal process of engagement. When our library closed, we showed up throughout our community, rebuilding trust and relationships. When we reopened and needed their support, the community showed up for us.

Stepping Up

As we emerge from a portentous election and contemplate the implications of a new era, many of us have turned to our colleagues and library associations to unify our advocacy efforts. Our profession faces overwhelming challenges at a perilous time: the conspicuous targeting of libraries in Project 2025; attacks on school, public, and academic libraries; the proposed dissolution of the Department of Education; risks to federally funded research; cuts to financial support; threats to the E-Rate program; tidal waves of book challenges; endangered

national libraries; censored federal data; and state laws criminalizing librarians. Moreover, we face these challenges without permanent leaders in place at the American Library Association and its Washington Office, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the National Archives, and soon the Library of Congress when the librarian's ten-year term ends. By this time next year, the structure of librarianship as a national institution might well lay in ruins. Confronted with such challenges, we must unite, galvanize public support, and amplify our voices as never before. With an uphill battle pending, our mission remains clear: to champion our deepest enduring values.

Yet, as the national policy ground shifts under us, our essential strength remains our persistent local appeal in school, on campus, and in town. As we experienced in Highland Park, the public still loves and supports libraries. Libraries represent that quintessential "3rd space" (Oldenburg) in our communities ("places essential to the political processes of democracy")—trusted, safe (and brave) spaces, boundary-spanning, accessible for everyone, and respectful of all voices. Democracies depend on libraries as third places conducive to deliberative discourse—where citizens can talk and work together to solve public problems.

With national programs in jeopardy, we can still make a difference locally by acting intentionally to safeguard democracy itself. When states pass repressive censorship laws, we can apply best practices in our selection and reconsideration processes and assemble strong coalitions to resist book banners. If we cannot protect the public's privacy through federal legislation, we can still model strong local privacy practices and teach privacy literacy. If we cannot ensure a public voice in Congress, we can convene deliberative dialogues locally to enable citizens to work through public problems together. If we cannot convert to greener energy consumption, we can embrace prudent environmental practices and facilitate dialogue that ignites local sustainability. If we cannot fight fires or floods, we can help communities prepare, respond, and recover when disasters strike. If we cannot halt post-truth disinformation, we can teach the media and information literacy skills necessary to distinguish fact from fiction. If we cannot prevail in elections, we can close the civic literacy gap in schools, on campus, and in town. If we cannot stop the disappearance of essential information on government websites and databases, we can link to information captured during the end-of-term-crawl that preserved much of the historical record. Working together, we stand as hubs on a robust national network capable of delivering the kind of transformative library leadership that will communicate a narrative that sustains and ignites hyperlocal community support and participation.

Our library associations have prepared us well to navigate the political terrain as strong advocates for essential programs and services, as well as the freedom to read. The American Library Association (ALA) offers training initiatives to teach us how to counter book bans and transform our communities, starting with Turning Outward in partnership with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, Models for Change, and a new program: Libraries as Leaders in Bridging Divides. We march in step with many other organizations, including the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the Urban Libraries Council, the EveryLibrary Institute, and the Association of Research Libraries.

The election left me and many others in despair and uncertainty; my grief drew me toward retreat and surrender. Yet the reopening of our library and overwhelming support for retaining challenged titles instilled a sense of hope and purpose—a renewed belief in our calling as librarians as trustworthy guardians of democracy. Now, we must begin anew, renew our contract with our communities, and turn outward toward them when they need us most—and when we need them most. They will show up, just as they did at the reopening

of our library and the board's hearing about challenged titles. Across America, we can forge a path forward as catalytic and impactful forces that inspire hope in a disheartened populace.

Libraries Must Restore Our Communities and Democracy

But time is short. We face a referendum on the principles of our democracy. We must not despair but believe in ourselves and our essential civic role. We have the will and capacity to restore our communities and democracy. We are the ones we have waited for.

To succeed, we must:

- Flip the frame and force political systems to respond on our own terms,
- Give local community members an opportunity to tell their stories,
- Elevate and celebrate the role of local citizens,
- Build trust and social capital—help communities bond and bridge across differences,
- Strengthen relationships and partner across our communities and beyond,
- Join forces to share strategies and best practices,
- Network with other democratic institutions and advocates,
- Reframe the debate from book banning to the power of reading,
- Create a resounding narrative about the learning and trust we bring everyone in our communities, and
- Amplify our voices by letting representatives know that citizens of all ages and viewpoints value and depend on us.

As one of the most trusted institutions in American communities, libraries must remain special places where people feel safe to share each other's stories, value differences, and find common ground. We must reframe the debate to focus on the issues that define us: opportunity, learning, safety, honesty, fairness, justice, inclusion, understanding, and shared responsibility. As ALA president, I learned that we must believe in ourselves and the power of libraries. Never has that ethic been truer than today.

Across America's communities, people yearn to connect, collaborate, and cocreate possibilities to share and solve problems together. We librarians must reimagine our civic role and reaffirm our democratic purpose. The challenges we face today may tower above us, yet they also present new opportunities for us to connect. As President Biden addressed the US Conference of Mayors, "Each of us must be Guardians of Democracy. To restore the strength of our institutions of democracy..."

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