

## **PLA 2020 – February in Music City!**

I was thrilled to learn that I was the chosen recipient of the OPLA PLA Conference grant to attend PLA 2020 in Nashville, Tennessee. PLA is considered THE conference to attend for public librarians, and to have the opportunity to attend was beyond exciting.

After talking about it nonstop for months, I finally arrived in Nashville on the last Tuesday in February just in time to miss a huge snowstorm in southwestern Ontario, so my trip was off to a great start!

Wednesday morning started with my favourite thing – learning about new books! I attended a morning session put on by ALA Booklist, featuring a panel of publishing reps from all the big publishers. Needless to say, my TBR list on Goodreads had grown exponentially by the end of the session, and I had tons of great recommendations to take back to my patrons and fellow librarians.

The opening keynote speaker on Wednesday afternoon was Stacey Abrams: a political leader, an accomplished author, and a wonderful speaker. Abrams grew up with a deep love of libraries (her mother is a librarian!) and her words about the role of libraries in democracy were inspiring. One of my favourite quotes was “Neutrality is not having no opinion. It’s inviting in all the opinions and giving them space.” Abrams is passionate about the importance of the census, and it was fascinating to hear her speak about the role US libraries will play in that process. Overall, a great way to kick off the conference!

After the opening address, I took some time to visit the exhibit hall. WOW. With over 300 vendors, it was a bit overwhelming to say the least! I had an opportunity to check out the latest technology, software, digital tools, furniture, and of course, oh so many books (more on those later).

My first session of the day on Thursday was “Serving Patrons with Mental Illness and Promoting Wellness.” This session featured a discussion about how to make our library spaces and policies welcoming, inclusive and safe, as well as including practical tips about how to deescalate situations where patrons are showing signs of distress. The presenters both shared their own experiences with mental illness, which was very emotional for both the presenters and the audience, and I appreciated their honesty and candour.

The next session I attended was “Intentional Inclusion: Disrupting Middle Class Bias in Programming.” Pima County Public library showcased how they are creating new ways to engage with their young patrons, those patrons experiencing homelessness, and those who are incarcerated. The session drew heavily on elements from both the Bridges Out Of Poverty framework and on Ryan Dowd’s “The Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness.” It was great to see how libraries are using these principles in action to provide services to those patrons who are experiencing difficulties.

My last session of the day, titled “So You DON’T Want to Be a Library Director,” was one that I attended mostly out of curiosity, but ended up being really interesting and informative! I learned about the various paths to leadership in public libraries, and how that library leadership can be accomplished through roles other than directorship.

Friday morning started off with “A Trauma Informed Approach to Public Library Service,” where I learned how Athens Regional Library re-envisioned their services, policies and spaces through a trauma-informed lens. While creating space for social workers in libraries is not necessarily a new phenomenon, it was interesting to hear how the staff had gone one step further to create a trauma-informed environment through staff training, examination of policies and procedures, and outreach.

From there, I headed to “From the Personal to the Political: Nonfiction You Can’t Put Down” featuring authors Bob Garfield, Bonnie Tsui, Megan Phelps-Roper and Sara Seagar - four very different authors whose stories were all equally fascinating. Each author shared a bit about their story and their writing process, and copies of their books were generously provided to everyone in attendance.

Next I attended “The Internet is Dark and Full of Terrors,” and it was just as terrifying as the title would lead you to believe. The speakers gave a background of the alt-right and incel movements, spoke about “doxing” and “swatting,” and shared their own stories about the dangers of the internet. While this alarming topic might seem only loosely connected to the library world, the speakers led the group in a discussion about the importance of understanding the dark side of the internet, especially in relation to our meeting room policies, our collection development, and our guest speakers.

Saturday morning I had the opportunity to explore the Nashville Public Library’s beautiful main branch. Of particular interest was the Civil Rights Room, a space dedicated to preserving the history of the nonviolent demonstrations that took place in Nashville in protest of racial segregation in the South. Filled with lots of photos, videos and even a symbolic lunch counter, the Civil Rights Room overlooks the intersection of Church Street and Seventh Avenue North, where many of the uprisings occurred. Visiting this room was both a solemn and an inspirational experience.

Later that day, PLA drew to a close with a closing keynote address by fellow Canadian Samantha Bee, who was witty and entertaining. Her

Having had some time to reflect on my PLA experience, my biggest takeaway has been the similarities in the challenges we are all facing, in our libraries and as a profession. There are so many library staff working hard to better their cities and spaces. I was also struck by the sense of connection I felt, even among people from library systems thousands of kilometres away from my own. There is something about being around so many smart, amazing professionals who are passionate about librarianship that reinvigorates my own passion and excitement for my job.

I truly cannot thank OLA enough for the opportunity to attend PLA! It was the opportunity of a professional lifetime and I am so grateful!

Oh, and about those books – if any of my fellow travellers noticed a frantic brunette unloading 20 books from her overweight suitcase at the Nashville airport – I’m not saying that was me but I’m not saying it wasn’t!

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