

Liz Zylstra – PLA Conference Report 2024

My conference experience started bright and early on Wednesday, August 3 with a keynote talk by Shola Richards. His talk was about workplace civility. As he noted, “For people who love to worry, the last few years have been great.” He went on to talk about the importance of kindness in the workplace with the essential caveat that nice and kind are not the same. (“Nice” is often a cover for passive aggressive behaviours).

I followed this up with a talk called “The Next Big Thing: Emerging Crises and How to Prepare.” Injecting some much-needed levity into a serious and somewhat dark topic, the presenters framed it as if they were in 2030 and looking back on 2024. They talked about book bans, library malpractice (what if you give someone bad or harmful advice?) AI generated books, the importance of maintaining public trust and highlighted that consistency is key as uneven enforcement of rules can often look like discrimination. I left this program determined to pay even more attention to details in the workplace and ensuring that all data is protected and backed up. After that I took in “How to Say the Hard Things: Lessons Learned in Years of Crisis.” In addition to Covid- related openings and closures, my library has also recently navigated through an expansion without the library ever having to close – which resulted in ongoing changes in service availability. My role involves consciously communicating about these changes and I was pleased to see the ways I had naturally already adhered to the presenter’s suggestions. She gave practical topics on responding to conflict and crises with a focus on transparency, compassion and transparency. I then toured the beautiful Columbus library. Like the library I work for, it’s a Carnegie Library and it was so great to see the similarities. I was particularly struck by how tidy the library was – and left feeling revitalized to check over my own branch for items out of place and clutter!

On Thursday, April 4 I attended a talk called “Equitable Collections Use” by librarians from Cuyahoga County, Nashville Public Library and New York Public Library. My library has “floated” for years and I found the panel conversation so interesting – I was surprised to find myself nodding along in agreement with librarians from such big systems. They clearly addressed that placing holds is easy for some people but not for others and it is an issue of equitable access. They had experienced many of the same pros and cons of floating that we have, and provided some actionable steps to remedy the issues. After this I attended “Challenging Post-Covid Impacts Through Storytime Standards” by Charleston Public Library who created an excellent framework for ensuring library storytime is truly the early literacy-building tool that we say it is. They talked as well about branding and communicating about storytime in a powerful and effective way.

Another talk I attended was called “Putting Our Words into Action: A Toolkit for Customer Service” presented by the Sequoyah Regional Library System. With 8 locations and 100 staff (a few more than my library of six branches and about 18 staff)

they have addressed some of the issues of how to ensure a consistent customer experience through the development of a clear toolkit for how they provide customer service that is truly equitable (ensuring that you don't get a different level of service based on the staff member you happen to connect with).

The final day started with a talk by Mary Annaise Helgar all about climate change and climate grief. One thing that really stuck with me was her comment that prior to Trump's election, she felt that she could trust "experts" to tell her about climate change. After his election, which she felt experts had said "could never happen" she realized she needed to be proactive and become the person communicating.

I followed this up with "Is Bigger Better? Collection vs. Space Equity." This talk had a section on merchandising which is one of my favourite library topics to read, talk and think about with a focus on equity and ensuring everyone can find something at the library (another favourite topic of mine!) The presenters noted that part of equity is knowing that what works for the majority might not be what works for everyone. They identified that sometimes, shelving crowds out patron uses of the space (English language classes, meeting rooms etc). They provided instructions for creating heat maps of your branch to show where the majority of items circulate from. I got a kick out of seeing that just like in my library, Baldacci, Patterson and Steel showed up as some of the most popular books. They demonstrated ways to make attractive displays highlighting some of the books by and about marginalized communities and had case studies showing the benefits of doing this.

Then I took in a session on values based communication - how to handle potentially controversial topics - drag storytime, safety issues in branches, banned books and more. The senior director of the Friends of the Saint Paul Library was in attendance and I really enjoyed hearing from her. She highlighted how they have a clear values document ("We believe... in libraries - in transparency - and in connection") and they use this to guide any communications they are issuing. She indicated that as the "Friends" group they could speak freely on some issues that the library staff could not, and that this was often a powerful strategy for them.

I went through the exhibit hall several times - it was huge and often crowded so it took a few times to chat with all the vendors I wanted to meet. I even met a vendor that I have been on many Zoom calls with. I left with a lot of flyers, pamphlets, books and of course tote bags!

The final speaker was Dulce Sloan, a comedian and writer.

Shortly before her talk began, an announcement came through the conference app that librarian Mychal Threets was in attendance and was going to be making a surprise appearance. His work on social media around library joy and library kids is so inspiring and I felt lucky to hear him speak in person. The conference ended on a high note with these two and I left feeling inspired and motivated.

The opening reception for the conference was cancelled due to a tornado warning and two of the keynote speakers cancelled on short notice but the conference

organizers worked some magic to make it feel like everything went exactly as they had originally planned – the next time I'm

planning an event and the speaker is late or something has to be cancelled I'm going to keep this in mind and stay calm.

Overall, this was an excellent experience and I leave feeling inspired, energized and enthusiastic about libraries – exactly what I was hoping for. I would encourage anyone to apply for this opportunity.



Librarian Mychal Threets at PLA–
from his Instagram page
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