

DIRECTORS UNDER ATTACK

Library directors often bear the brunt of intellectual freedom challenges from community members—even from their own boards—and some have chosen to leave

By April Witteveen

In April 2022, staff at the Crook County Library, OR, were waiting for the next bus of elementary school students to arrive for their monthly visit. These sessions were a highlight for the students, as they did not have access to an on-site school library. Ten minutes passed, then 20—the school bus never arrived. Eventually, a library worker received a text message from one of the school’s teachers: “They took us off the bus and said all library visits are canceled, effective immediately.”

April Witteveen is the library director at Oregon State University’s Cascades Campus.

I was the library director at the time and was confused about what had precipitated this hasty decision and baffled by a lack of direct communication about it. The next day, we read the letter that had been sent to all families of students at the school: no more public library visits while the district “evaluated other opportunities.” We came to learn that a parent had complained about a book their child had checked out while at the library.

This set off a chain of events led by an organized group of local residents. Eight months later, I found myself in a board meeting attended by nearly 200 people, where the library board ultimately voted not to censor, label, or cre-

ate any special collections in the children's department, particularly involving material with LGBTQIA+ characters or themes. While the board's decision reaffirmed the library field's stand on intellectual freedom, the stress of this contentious period affected me deeply, both professionally and personally.

My story is familiar to many other library leaders in the country, some of whom, like me, wound up leaving their position for a new start elsewhere. The decision to leave is never easy. Many who did resign in the face of recent intellectual freedom challenges—both new directors and long-time administrators at their libraries—felt that they needed to leave because they were unable to focus on the necessary work of overseeing the library and its staff, and were instead devoting their energies to facing down challenges, reinforcing policies, and—sometimes—looking out for their own safety and mental health.

ACCUSATIONS OF AN "AGENDA"

Renee Greenlee, former director at the Vinton Public Library, IA, shares how, just four months into her new role, a small group with a unified purpose attended a library board meeting. "A resident made a statement that our library had a liberal agenda demonstrated by our hiring practices...and the 'liberal' and LGBTQ[IA+] books we had in our collection," she says. At the time, the library had a gay children's librarian and a transgender library clerk, who was misgendered. The group stated that the library's purchasing and hiring choices were leading them to boycott library services.

At the Hillsdale Community Library, MI, Bryonna Barton was also in the first few months of her directorship when she came under fire—in this case, from her board. A week before the April 2022 board meeting, Barton shared a post on the library's Facebook page celebrating National Library Week. The post included a trivia question related to book challenges, which board members claimed "pushed a false narrative" and supported an agenda on book bans and censorship that the board equated with a liberal political position. During the meeting, board members said that they were "concerned that there were books in the library on diversity, coming-of-age, and challenging subjects" such as mental and sexual health, notes Barton. At the May board meeting, the same members stated that "intellectual freedom is not a real thing, but a made-up word by the library world to push an agenda." They "wanted to review our collection development policy and add verbiage that would not allow the library to purchase any books" on the subjects they objected to, says Barton.

In Crook County, I was also accused by a small, local group of operating with an agenda. Where were our anti-abortion children's books, or books with a biblical perspective on gender, the group asked? If we were truly being equitable, they argued, we would have books on topics they

described as "woke" and conservative values alike. We ordered additional titles from Christian publishers and shared our recently updated collection development policy, but these actions weren't given much weight in the greater argument that we were harming children by continuing to intersperse LGBTQIA+ titles within the children's collection.

CENSORSHIP BY ANY OTHER NAME

The resident who led the anti-intellectual freedom charge at the Vinton Library "was very careful to say they were not asking for any staff or books to be removed," says Greenlee, but they did ask that for each book featuring transgender people, the library also offer a book that shares biblical perspectives on gender and sexuality. Additionally, this resident believed that the library should provide a monthly list of books that the children's librarian planned to read at story time, to "keep the children's programming in check."

David Eckert, former director at the Craighead County Jonesboro Public Library (CCJPL), AR, first came under pressure in 2019, when the library invited Meredith

Russo, an author who is transgender, to give a presentation. "Once we started publicizing the event and people started researching [Russo], some people loudly objected," he says. The subsequent board meeting was contentious, but the board "stood strong and allowed the event."

Russo's appearance touched off a series of intellectual freedom challenges, says Eckert. The county judge, who appoints four of the seven board members, filled two vacated board positions with individuals who came to the roles "with the idea that they would try to move or remove all the LGBTQ[IA+] material in the library," according to Eckert.

In June 2021, CCJPL again found itself at odds with community members concerned about library content. Because of a capital-improvement project that placed space constraints on the collection, materials for all ages were temporarily shelved more closely together than during regular operations. As the library put out its annual Pride Month displays, titles in the teen section caught the attention of a group of parents. A post went

up on a local Tea Party-affiliated Facebook page, followed by a letter to the editor of the local *Jonesboro Sun* penned by the wife of one of Eckert's board members.

"Several proposed policies were brought before the board by [the newly appointed] board members," says Eckert, "including one to have all of the board members review any book that had any reference to romance or sexuality in it." The new members also presented a policy to establish board authority over displays in the library, and proposed that the board be given the authority to decide "which materials the library was allowed to buy."

By her third month in the director's seat at Boundary County Library, ID, Kimber Glidden was fielding accusations from community members at board meetings and in personal conversations "that the library was not protecting

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RENEE GREENLEE

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BRYONNA BARTON

children from explicit or pornographic materials.” The materials in question contained LGBTQIA+ content as well as themes centering the Black Lives Matter movement or racial justice issues; none of the titles were intended to be sexually provocative or met the legal definition of obscenity. “The primary target was *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe,” Glidden notes, which was not even a part of the library’s collection—nor were additional titles submitted for removal. Community members would not accept any solution other than “absolute banishment of all titles” related to the topics they objected to, said Glidden. “I had one man tell me that they wanted the ability, guaranteed by policy, to create a blacklist of books.”

In Crook County, some of the residents I spoke with were adamant that “we don’t want to ban books.” Instead, they wanted me to create a segregated collection in the children’s room that would hold materials with LG-BTQIA+ content. I explained on multiple occasions how labeling other than viewpoint-neutral directional aids is a tool of censorship, as described in the American Library Association’s (ALA) Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights (bit.ly/3jGcu5j). I also worked to educate the community on the organization of library collections—for example, how creating such a special collection would not

be the same as having all cookbooks shelved in the same location. I also explained that making a special collection could lead to anyone being interested in that collection being outed, which would be particularly unsafe for LGBTQIA+ patrons. “I’m not asking you to burn any books,” the county judge told me on numerous occasions—but he did add, “if it were up to me, I’d put all these books behind the counter and a parent would have to ask for them.”

BOARD INVOLVEMENT

Dayna Williams-Campbell had been director at the Victoria Public Library, TX, for 13 years when she received a phone call in August 2021 requesting that she meet with a “small group” of parents. Some 35 or 40 people came to the meeting, prepared with 40 requests for reevaluation of library materials, the first steps in the challenge process. Her board backed Williams-Campbell as she upheld intellectual-freedom ideals in the face of these challenges. However, the tide shifted as the community activists continued their tactics; when board vacancies arose, city council and county commissioners “filled all open library advisory board positions with people who were part of the book-challenge group,” Williams-Campbell reports—“every seat, even though I had well-qualified members who asked to be reappointed.”

In Hillsdale, the problems originated with the board. According to Barton, “three board members at the time started the book ban/censorship [movement]. I wasn’t fighting only the community, but also the majority of the board for the right to read.” One of these board members shared messages via Facebook, Barton says, that “encouraged community members to come and support his mis-

sion by attending board meetings in order to ‘protect the children’ under the guise of ‘proper curation’” of library materials.

In Vinton, the library board was surprised by the vehemence and persistence of the activism, although Greenlee recalls “one board member who wanted me to consider and potentially agree to” the requests being made. “This board member also resisted the bylaws changes regarding public comments that are discriminatory and harassing,” and wanted to be exempt from the Statement of Ethics for Board Trustees that Greenlee had brought forward. “I discovered that a library’s ability to effect positive, equitable actions in a community is only as strong as the board that approves the policies that support those actions,” she notes.

The Boundary County board “was as supportive as they knew how to be,” Glidden says, despite the entire board being targeted by a community-led recall campaign. “After my resignation, they began the process of capitulation to meet the demands” of those calling for censorship.

In Crook County I had one board member actively recruiting residents to speak out at board meetings against the library’s practices; this was the same parent who originally complained about the item her child took home from a library visit while in school. That parent was then appointed to the board by county leadership “because she represents a significant portion of the population here who aren’t going to like finding out what [the library is] doing,” the county judge told me, equating the percentage of the county who voted for President Trump with those in opposition to the library’s choices.

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DAYNA WILLIAMS-CAMPBELL

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DAVID ECKERT

THE NEED FOR A FRESH START

While these directors received both public and personal support, it is not surprising that they were still exhausted. Williams-Campbell, a seasoned director, notes that she had to shift focus away from her usual duties, instead spending her days “working with the requests for reevaluation, maintaining staff morale, meeting with the city manager [and] the city legal department, preparing to answer city council questions”—sacrificing time that she needed for strategic planning, improving library services, and being available to staff for training and support. In addition to the change in workload, she was also dealing with harassment from community members that resulted in requests for police to drive by her home in the name of safety. After a year and a half of struggle, Williams-Campbell “felt that I could no longer show up to be the leader I wanted to be for my team, and that they deserved someone who was there for them.”

Barton describes how her days changed: “I was working every minute of every day to educate myself, pull resources, and better equip myself” for upcoming board meetings. Staff morale had plummeted: “We were scared to open the doors, not knowing who would come [in] and what accusations would be made.” Barton learned that a photo of her was circulating among local Facebook groups

along with malicious gossip. “I was terrified of walking around and being alone. I moved out of my apartment and commuted an hour and a half to work,” she says. Barton became ill as a result of the unrelenting pressure. “I still think about the meetings and what people said and accused me of. It doesn’t go away or turn off the moment you leave. It is traumatic...our bodies and minds aren’t designed to take that much hatred,” she says. “Ultimately, I resigned from Hillsdale to try and get the library out of the line of fire, and for my own physical and mental health.” Barton has taken a new director role in a community an hour north of Hillsdale.

As the community concern in Vinton was centered on library workers as well as materials, Greenlee observed her LGBTQIA+ staff members becoming “devastated and demoralized.” She says her own work-life balance was “awful,” particularly as she worked “every night for a month” to craft an intellectual freedom response statement to her board and community. “I was hurt and angry, too, for my staff and my own teenagers who are part of the LGBTQ[IA+] community.” Despite deep feelings of guilt over leaving her team and organization, Greenlee moved on to become a support librarian in a new system and is now “hesitant to ever take on a director role again.”

Glidden echoes Greenlee’s feelings of losing a sense of work-life balance. “This has consumed my life,” she says. “We do not feel safe in our community. I cannot find employment; people have shown up at our house.” Glidden struggles to “not become angry or bitter, but I’m trying to step away from the emotion to create a meaningful path forward.” She is currently exploring the development of a nonprofit aimed at informing communities about threats to democracy such as censorship.

Because of the increased stress in his position and the anger directed at him, Eckert developed a feeling of unease whenever he was out in public: “I would start looking over my shoulder to see if someone was following me,” he says. “I decided this was no way to live—or not the way I wanted to live.” Library staff in Jonesboro had begun leaving ahead of Eckert’s own departure, including the assistant director, assistant business/HR manager, public relations manager, and several frontline employees. “I know many staff were starting to see therapists and taking anxiety medication to help manage their stress,” says Eckert. He is now the director of the Waterloo Public Library, IA.

During my last seven months as Crook County Library director, I routinely came home in tears, angry, and distracted, and experienced significant anxiety leading up to each board meeting. Despite our staff doing tremendous work both inside and outside the library, I had little time or energy to move the library ahead strategically, instead working to counter misinformation, offer as much support as I could to frontline staff, develop new procedures to handle fractious board meetings, and continue to reiterate the ethics and best practices of public librarianship with stakeholders. Additionally, I was commuting, and the hours spent driving each week were wearing on me. I am now working in the city where I live, managing the library in a branch campus of a state university. While I miss many aspects of my nearly 20 years in public librarianship, especially the organization where I first flexed my library administrator muscles, my

STANDING UP

The directors in this article offered their thoughts on how a library can be prepared for intellectual freedom challenges.

POLICY REVIEW: Ensure that your Collection Development and Request for Reconsideration policies are up to date and worded to unequivocally support intellectual freedom and the right to read. Include language stating that groups may not submit Requests for Reconsideration en masse or anonymously, and clearly state the time line for response.

REACH OUT: Contact regional and state library associations, ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom, or other groups that connect libraries to learn your rights and explore possible next steps in the face of an intellectual freedom challenge.

ACTIVATE A SUPPORT BASE: Make sure that your Friends of the Library and other mission-aligned groups are informed and ready to speak up for intellectual freedom. This could be local or state social justice groups, LGBTQIA+ affinity groups, etc.

REFINE BOARD AGENDAS AND BOARD BYLAWS: Create procedures to appropriately manage public comment and ensure that board meetings are treated as such, versus being perceived as open, public forums or town halls.

EDUCATE STAKEHOLDERS ON INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM: Board trainings are available through United for Libraries, and these materials are also useful for municipal leaders such as city managers, county commissioners, mayors, and others.

BE AWARE: As calls for censorship continue in libraries across the country, keep these stories on your radar and share with staff and stakeholders to be prepared for potential challenges at your own organization.

stress levels have dropped significantly. I am more able to focus on the key aspects of my new job, and have found renewed work-life balance.

Many of the directors I spoke with who have moved on to new libraries know that the battles at their previous organizations are not over. “As I was leaving, the library was starting to receive book challenges,” says Eckert. “While most were not successful, there was one that was not handled properly by the board.” Having a strong library policy in place, however, ultimately helped overturn the challenge. William-Campbell tells *LJ* that while she had tools available to support her own mental health during her time of crisis, “education about the necessity of this type of support, and recognition by employers of the effect of bullying on employees [by those challenging books], needs to be increased” in order to keep this type of burnout from happening again. I recently heard that numerous LGBTQIA+ titles from Crook County Library’s teen collection were removed, and the board member who brought that fight to the library continues to request a labeling system for LGBTQIA+ materials. Library administrators can be as prepared as possible, and put forth their best efforts to support intellectual freedom and access at their institutions (see the list of resources above), but there are still times when directors say, “I didn’t sign up for this.” ■