

Introduction

My public librarian interview session was exceptional. I interviewed Mr. Eric Lashley of the Georgetown Public Library (GPL). He was a gracious host and was willing to answer my questions about public librarianship. We met in his office at the library on Wednesday, November 11th, 2020. We began the interview at four that afternoon and it lasted nearly fifty minutes.

Interview Preparation

When I started doing research on Mr. Lashley, I looked first at the GPL website¹. That only provided his contact information, but I did find out several important things about the library itself. From there I turned to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) website for information on the medal they were awarded in 2018². Google yielded two informative articles in an online newspaper³. I used the information I found when constructing my interview questions. To record the interview, I used the Voice Memos app on my iPhone. Later, I used the university library's free service to do the initial transcription, which I had to edit afterwards.

A Brief History of Mr. Lashley

Eric Lashley has been the director of the GPL for twenty years. He earned his Master's in Library Science from the iSchool. He was initially interested in presidential libraries and archives, but after working at the Austin Public Library, he believed he found his calling. Mr. Lashley also worked at the San Antonio Public Library before coming to the GPL in 1996. In 2000, he was appointed as director³. In addition to the IMLS award in 2018, he was recognized as the Texas Librarian Association (TLA) Librarian of the Year in 2019⁴.

Mr. Lashley's Work at the GPL

The Georgetown Public Library stands out in a couple of ways. As Mr. Lashley says, "we're also in charge of arts and culture." And I can testify that on a previous trip to the library, I saw the works of two different local artists prominently displayed. Being a part of the cultural downtown area also puts the GPL in a position to be a part of tourism and Mr. Lashley manages the Convention and Visitors Bureau too.

The GPL also counts a social worker among their staff³. Members of the homeless population have cultivated a strong relationship with the staff, and the staff likewise desired to help but lacked the knowledge and means to do so. After years of lamenting, "I'm a librarian, not a social worker," it occurred to Mr. Lashley that a social worker was exactly what they needed.

The programs for teens, tweens, and children are also very important at the GPL. There are separate spaces for children and teens at the library that cater to each group, and the number of programs organized for each is around three hundred a year. The library has four dedicated children's librarians, a teen librarian, and a Teen Advisory Board.

Professional Involvement

The library staff keep abreast of current events in the library world through TLA conferences. Some members of the staff are also on committees within the organization and have been through the Tall Texan Leadership Institute. Additionally, the library is part of Connecting Texas Libraries Statewide

(CTLS), a consortium of about 200 public libraries. They host conferences and have a listserv that is useful for answering questions and sharing news about new programs.

Mr. Lashley's Views of Public Librarianship

When I asked Mr. Lashley to describe the typical interactions in the library, he said, "you get every conversation known to man." This is because the patrons range from the homeless to local millionaires. Public libraries are very inclusive; they are one of the few places where everyone is welcome. And the trust between staff and patrons means they can talk about anything.

Later in the interview, I asked what sort of advice Mr. Lashley had for future public librarians. He started with, "you really need to understand that the word public is in public library. That does mean everybody." The GPL interacts a great deal with patrons that are typically underserved and forgotten. Mr. Lashley emphasizes the need for a service and social justice mentality. Public libraries are also a good place for anyone who is perpetually curious. Every patron that comes in and asks a question is an opportunity to find out something new.

Experience During COVID-19

The GPL closed its doors when the pandemic began and when they opened again, their foot traffic decreased to 35% of what it had been. But the amount of materials checked out only dropped by 15%. The library also drastically reduced seating to keep building occupancy to a minimum. The public computer space was also converted into a check-in area so that the staff can work while social distancing.

The staff has seen a few changes as well. Because the majority of the library's volunteers were senior citizens, many could not come back when the library reopened. Before the pandemic, all of the shelving work had been done by those volunteers. Now things are different. The librarians are now having to do more shelving, which fits as they have few programs they can do.

Future Plans

While Mr. Lashley believes COVID-19 will keep library operations curtailed for a while, he is also confident they will bounce back. As he says, people are "sick and tired of virtual learning... They want human action, real connection." But beyond that, he and his staff have found it difficult to plan much beyond take-home kits for children and a virtual reading program for teens.

Another effect COVID has had on the GPL is that the coffee shop inside was forced to close after 14 good years. Eventually the library will find a new vendor to staff that amenity because it was a big part of their operation. I mentioned earlier that the computer space has been repurposed. It is hard to say when things will be safe enough to open those back up.

How This Relates to Me

I worked for years in both sales and at a doctor's office before moving to Georgetown for school. I also volunteered with one of the shelters back home, collecting and distributing coats and blankets in the fall. Now I am an office assistant, and I am learning that I miss helping customers more directly. I have a heart of service and will seek justice in whatever community work.

I plan on maximizing my time at the iSchool, prioritizing classes that will help me be a better public librarian and meeting people with similar goals. During the summers, I hope to volunteer at the GPL to bolster my knowledge and experience. And while I am currently a student member of the ALA, I plan on eventually joining other organizations like the Public Libraries Association (PLA) and the TLA.

Once I have obtained my degree, I want to work at a public library similar to the GPL. I want my community and my patrons to be able to trust me with their problems. I want to be a part of something bigger than myself, where I can also foster a love of knowledge and learning.

Summary

As I said, I enjoyed my interview experience. I learned about what separates public libraries from other libraries, and what it takes to work in that kind of environment. Public libraries are places of learning, equality, inclusiveness, service, and community. That being said, I believe and hope that, in a way, I caught a glimpse of my future.

Endnotes

1. City of Georgetown Texas. "Eric Lashley, Library Director." Georgetown Public Library. Accessed October 20, 2020. <https://library.georgetown.org/eric-lashley/>.
2. IMLS. "2018 National Medal for Museum and Library Service," May 17, 2019. <https://www.imls.gov/events/2018-national-medal-museum-and-library-service>.
3. Linan, Ali. "People Q&A: Eric Lashley, Director of Georgetown Public Library." Community Impact. Community Impact, August 9, 2018. <https://communityimpact.com/austin/georgetown/editors-pick/2018/08/09/people-qa-eric-lashley-director-of-georgetown-public-library/>.
4. Linan, Ali. "Georgetown Public Library's Eric Lashley Named Texas Librarian of the Year," April 22, 2019. <https://communityimpact.com/austin/georgetown/arts-entertainment/2019/04/22/georgetown-public-libraries-eric-lashley-named-texas-librarian-of-the-year/>.

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- The Chicago Manual of Style. 16th ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.