

Thoughts on Being "The New Guy"

By: Dave Miller

If your town doesn't have a stop light, you live in a small town. Same goes for a McDonald's. When the gas station is a socially acceptable place to gather, you live in a small town. When people drive lawnmowers, tractors, or mule teams through town and it doesn't surprise you, you live in a small town. I could go on, but by any measure, Hope, in northeastern Bartholomew County, is a small town. It's an agricultural community, like so many little towns around Indiana. Faced with the pressures of a changing landscape and economy, Hope has developed a fierce independent and protective streak. The businesses, institutions, heritage, churches, and yes, the library, are referred to in the collective. They are *our* businesses, *our* heritage, *our* churches and *our* library. When you are a little guy, you need to look out for yourself. Everybody knows everybody, and chances are they know your grandparents and cousins as well.

But nobody in town knows my grandparents and cousins, because I'm not a native. I am originally from another little town, Bluffton. My undergraduate studies took me to Butler University in Indianapolis, and after college I found a job at IMCPL in circulation and I enjoyed the work. After a time, I decided to get my Masters' degree in Library Science. I attended IUPUI while I worked and finished my degree in 2000, landing a job in reference with the Johnson County Public Library.

Eventually, circumstances moved my wife and me south to Hope, and I commuted to Greenwood for almost a year. Luckily, in January 2006 I was hired by the Bartholomew County Public Library, and I enjoyed my work in that reference department, but was simultaneously curious about the small branch in the small town where I lived. My chance came more quickly than I had anticipated, when Karen Alvis, the manager of the Hope Library, de-

cidated to retire after 28 years of service. I asked my director, Beth Booth Poor, about the job, and it was eventually offered to me. About that time, a lot of questions started floating through my head. Would I be bored out there? What would happen if I didn't get along with my coworkers? There are only three of us at Hope, and any personality conflict would be magnified since we work so closely together. Would the close relationships that I would inevitably form with library patrons begin to feel claustrophobic? Was I ready to be a supervisor? Deciding that the answer to all of these questions was a resounding "I don't have any idea!" I accepted.

And suddenly, I was "The New Guy at the Library." In a small town, it takes a while before you're no longer The New Guy. It takes lots of introductions, lots of storytimes, lots of sheepishly accepted produce in the summer, and most of all, lots of interaction. There is a steep learning curve in getting to know our patrons. By knowing them, we mean not only knowing their names, but their stories as well. Who they are, where they live (for some reason everyone wants to know where people live, on what road and who your neighbors are), what they read and why. The little old lady who only listens to books on CD really appreciates it if we have a few pulled aside for her every couple of weeks. Another patron was applying for jobs in the area and her resume needed some work. We were happy to do it for her. The fella that delivers the paper in the morning has a tough time walking around, and he's always grateful if we can meet him outside when he pulls up. I'm happy to spend time to help another when she comes in because she can never figure out how to print pictures from her email and we both know it. There is a ton of institutional knowledge that we need in order to excel, and my goal is to know it all. This is a career that appeals to me because

I enjoy helping people, and doing everything that I can to that end is the thing that makes my job exceptionally rewarding.

Being a librarian in a community like this is a very interesting, and at times, a very strange job. From moment to moment, I may be required to act goofy and make up puppet voices, then help someone find resources for dealing with a very serious subject like tax forms or medical terminology. Later today, I'll be security and a custodian, and probably tech support as well. Most librarians focus on a discipline. I'm one of the lucky ones who get to do a little of everything. And making sure that the library is intertwined in our little community is certainly part of that. Here, everyone leans on each other a little more, and there lies a crucial role for the library. Since I've been here, we've developed good working relationships with several area businesses and nonprofits. On Halloween, I paraded 30 kids around the town square and persuaded many of those businesses to pass out candy to our little ghouls. Those kinds of activities are silly and require more than a little shamelessness sometimes, but they are exactly the kinds of gestures that build and strengthen relationships that are crucial to a library's, and a community's success. It's a big job for a New Guy, but I think that I'm up to it.

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