

Looking Back:

## "My First Year as Director of a Public Library"

Fern Miner  
Director  
Lebanon Public Library

Julie Hersberger  
Director  
Batesville Memorial Public Library

Linda Robertson  
Director  
Wabash Public Library

David Eisen  
Director  
Mishawaka-Penn Public Library

### Lebanon Public Library

The first thing a new director does is to get acquainted with the staff, the board members, and the day-to-day workings of the library. Read the Board minutes of meetings, records of transactions, and correspondence to develop the history that one needs to go forward. In the get-acquainted period, it would be normal to "see things to change," but a wise director will wait for the right timing to suggest changes. First impressions may not be the best ones, and caution is advised for this reason. It is good if there are procedural manuals and policy manuals, but one may find that routines and practice do not necessarily follow the procedures. Hold frequent staff meetings to get a feel for problems as the staff sees them.

Getting to know the community is another first responsibility. There are meetings one must attend. A director has the institution to represent. The degree of involvement in community organizations may be dictated by one's personality, family commitments, or the desires of the board.

It should be possible in a matter of weeks or months to implement one or more of one's short term goals, and to lay the groundwork for the long term goals. A new director may discover some untapped talents of staff members, and be able to make adjustments in job descriptions to utilize these talents.

It is vitally important to communicate with staff, board, and community. The adjustments are much easier when each faction knows what is happening.

Now that I've completed my first year, I can reflect on what the year has been like. The "surprises" were the number of demands on my time. I'm amazed at the number of sales calls that a director must handle! (How many light bulb salespeople can there be?) Quick decision making is essential when you are the person in charge.

In my building, the board treasurer takes care of the bookkeeping and tells me what forms are needed for

budgeting. One day I discovered the Manual of Budgeting and Financial Procedures in the file cabinet. If I had found it sooner, I could have felt better informed. I think there are too many forms to fill out. If the same forms are asked for next year, I may be better prepared. I might have spent more time reading what is filed in order to have anticipated some of the paperwork.

Attending professional meetings is essential to new and former directors. The exchange of ideas and the opportunities for information are invaluable. My colleagues do not want failures from other directors. I still need to learn to delegate more duties, although I am proud that I am in touch with each of the staff member's duties. This is easier in a small library setting. Being the director of a small library allows me many opportunities to be a librarian, and yet there are rewards in being the manager too! A poor time-manager doesn't have a chance!

Fern Miner

#### Wabash Public Library

As a brand new library director in 1970, I had little choice in determining my first priorities. Plans had already been drawn for a library addition and remodeling project. The bookkeeper and I spent a good part of those important first weeks putting the finishing touches to a bond issue transcript.

I was blessed seven times, however, with an outstanding group of people on the Library Board of Trustees. They had done their homework and

had involved the staff in the building planning, so that part of the job was pretty well set in concrete. The Board had made arrangements for the architects to visit me at my old job to review the drawings and make suggestions for change. I arrived in Wabash in mid-October and by the end of November we had sold bonds.

I followed as director a well-respected woman from the community. She had been THE librarian for some 45 years. She and four full-time staffers, a couple of people working on the bookmobile, and two high school pages had things under control.

The fact remained that when I drove to Wabash for my job interview, I stopped at a service station to ask directions to the library (an institution housed in the exact same location since 1901) and was told by the attendant that he didn't know where the public library was! This, in a town of 13,000!

So, one of my first jobs as library director would be that of promotion and image. Fortunately, one of my Board members was a retired city editor from the local newspaper and our media relations became excellent. My own journalism minor from Ball State stood me in good stead in those early days, and continues to do so.

My arrival as the "new kid" on the library block, coming in to replace a much-beloved older woman, was not an easy obstacle to overcome with the existing staff (one of whom had been in place 38 years, two for 15 years). Yet another staff person, a recent divorcee, supervised her daughter, a high school page, and all the custodial work was done in two hours a day by another high school student. Truly, I was like a new in-law thrust into the midst of a well established and close-knit family unit.

The first day on the job I'm sure I passed in a daze. I remember dressing in my middle-of-the-road outfit, being photographed and interviewed by the local press, and, surely, I tried to get acquainted with the staff. It didn't appear that the library was overly busy, so I remember reading the titles of the books on shelves in my office (the banned books, so to speak) and going through files and wondering what in the world I had gotten myself into!

I soon learned there were no written policies (personnel or operating); there was no materials selection statement; the budget was barely adequate to keep the doors open; and the library was so crowded that staff and patrons pretty much operated out of each other's pockets.

The collection had not been weeded for years; there was no AV equipment; one story hour a week constituted the public programming; and the basement filled with water at the first hint of rain. The need for expanded facilities was never in question—a fact the public evidently recognized as there was no remonstrance to a 20-year bond issue.

I learned in the first week, if not the first day, that my previously shy demeanor had to be abandoned. A new library director finds gumption fast! I made mistakes. I probably did not cultivate the Board enough (I wanted them to recognize how self-sufficient I was).

But I did things right, too. Almost immediately I joined Business and Professional Women, the local historical society, and a well-established book review club. I used the local newspaper for any and all excuses for good publicity (the fact that we were under construction helped). I started a fund raising campaign to beef up the gift fund and to get my name and in-

tentions out to the leaders and business people in the community. In addition, I worked the circulation/reference desk whenever I could to let people see me.

I tried to set a good example by being friendly but firm, by being organized (I'm a great list maker), and by working with the Board to establish where they wanted me to go (community involvement was high on their priority list and, being single, was fairly easy for me to accomplish in a community that seemed starved for new blood).

It would be several years before we would accomplish a completed building, an enlarged and more professional staff, written policies and job descriptions, a vastly increased budget, expanded services and collections, automation, and a firm and important place in the community (at the same location but with better identity). We are no longer timid nor smug about the status quo. All of this did not happen the first day on the job, or the first week, or the first year.

Today, with 16 years of experience, I can see things I would have done differently, but the result of some of the early fumbling for priorities allowed me to see the full range of inherited problems very quickly and gave me better perspective on what had to be dealt with now and what could wait. It takes a long time to effect change and charging into a new situation with missionary zeal oozing from every pore could be disastrous to a new director, experienced or not.

Linda Robertson

### Batesville Memorial Public Library

The following recommendations are based on personal experiences not only as a new library director, but also as having been a staff member working for a new library director as a high school page. All of my work has been done primarily in very small public libraries, serving populations under 5,000.

For four years I was employed as a high school page at the Cambridge City Public Library. For the past eight years I have been the director of the Batesville Memorial Public Library, which was my first management position.

The first year in a very small community is very different from working in a large institution. Having grown up in and worked in a small town library proved to be an immense help. When working in a small community, it is important to remember that your job is but a small part of small town life. What you do outside the library will be just as important as what you accomplish in the library.

Probably the most important effort to attempt is to get to know as many people as soon as you can. Your staff will be the first group of people you must impress. This should not be done by arriving to show the people what "real library service is." This kind of attitude is not going to be well received. A low key approach to learning about your new community will work best. Major tip: DO NOT BEGIN EVERY SENTENCE WITH 'WELL IN MY LAST LIBRARY THIS IS HOW WE DID THIS.' A superiority complex does little to win friends and influence people.

I was rather lucky in Batesville. My first day on the job I was interviewed by the local paper and was the next week's cover girl, my life history in print for all to see. This makes every-

one feel they know you well. It is a little harder to remember everyone you meet, but make a special effort to remember people's names and faces.

Meeting people is the prime function of a first year manager. Even if you are the world's worst manager, they will forgive your many faults if they like you. If you are disliked by people in a small community, no matter how terrific you are at your library job, they will not respect your efforts.

Be very careful about changes. If you feel something must be different, especially changes in library procedures, ask the advice of the staff person who has been working at the library the longest. Try to point out the logic in the change and be sure to explain 'why' the change should be made.

Some examples. When I was in high school, our new library director decided there was more room for non-fiction books while most people read fiction. She had us switch the books. This caused chaos as the books had basically been in the same order for over 30 years. The result was that the patrons could not find the books as they used to, and it was difficult for the staff to shelve books as they did when they had the shelves memorized. The director did not stay long and as soon as she left, we replaced the books in their original shelves before the new director was hired. I learned an important lesson.

In Batesville, patrons have not been re-registered in over 35 years. Still, after nearly eight years here, I will not be the "new" director that came to town and took everyone's library number away from them. I realize the goal of having an accurate number of library users is not worth the antagonism of the public over such a major change. If we ever go to a

computerized circulation system, then we could justify such a change.

As far as other accomplishments go, I strongly feel the first year should be devoted to the people. Goals should not be set until you know your library users. I personally did not get involved with state library organizations and committees until I knew my library was receiving my best ability to provide them with the service they wanted and needed. After that was established I became active in ILA and other professional obligations.

As is probably evident, I am very much "people" oriented rather than "goal" oriented, but in a small community library they really cannot be separated. You are providing library services for the community, not for your own ego. By getting to know the community, you will be able to ascertain what they want and need. In most small towns, they will be MORE than happy to tell you what they want from you.

Here are some specific suggestions:

1. Introduce yourself to the newspaper editor and the local radio station manager if there is one in your town. Flood them with news releases, at least one a week.

2. Do not jump right into activities and organizations. Give them the excuse that you need to see how much time your job requires. This helps avoid any time crush as well as helping you see how the community sets up politically.

3. Do, however, accept the chance to speak about the library at every opportunity to groups and organizations. I found it extremely interesting that within the first two months I was in Batesville, I was asked to speak to almost every organization about a library I knew nothing about. The main purpose was to get to know people and for them to look over the new director.

4. Try to figure out exactly what it is a director directs. They do not teach this very well at library school. However, after a few months, you will have more than enough to keep you busy. Enjoy those first couple of weeks when you sit at your clean desk, thinking of things to make you look busy and competent.

5. Have fun. Be innovative within reason. Get a dog for your library. We did. (Not in the first year, though!) Working with children's programming is always well thought of. Also, if the school permits, make visits to the local elementary classrooms. Take the dog if you have one.

Finally, remember you will always represent the library no matter how long you live in the town or how many other activities you engage in. It is a label, "THE LIBRARIAN". In a small town, expect rumors. I was a pregnant, unwed mother the second month I was in town. This vicious rumor came from a neighboring town. I laughed, but did inform my board, and especially my boyfriend, that the rumor existed, but was definitely untrue.

Small town libraries are great. You get to be everything from the director to the maintenance person for toilet sanitation and air conditioning expert. It's not for everyone, but it is for me.

Julie Hersberger

### Mishawaka-Penn Public Library

Although one would not realistically expect any new library director to begin work by singing the lyrics to "Getting to know you" from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*, the sentiment is accurate. No matter whether this is the director's first job in his first library, or the director's first year in his tenth library, the first year on the job is always one of assessment and learning. The actions and directions the director will take in subsequent years stem from what is learned about the library, the staff, the collections, and the community.

Typically after the selection process is completed and a new director named, the Library Board begins sending information about the library to the new director. Even before arriving on the job, the education begins. Now one finds out whether the Board was completely accurate in describing the library and the community during the interview process. Now one finds out on paper just what the library's real state of affairs might be.

Once on the job, the director faces an even less enviable task. Besides being compelled to "direct" immediately, the new director must also absorb and assess as quickly as possible just what the library is like. What is the physical condition of the library? What are the staff members like? What are their levels of competence? Are their job descriptions accurate? What are the library's personnel and collection policies like? Are they realistic? Are they being used? What are the collections like? What services are being offered? What is the library's financial position? And last, but certainly not least, how are the Board members to work with? Are they the Board they claimed to be during the interview process?

The new director needs to spend time assessing his staff, both as individuals and as professionals. Personnel may easily prove to be the new director's biggest headache. Are the staff members truly an asset to the library? Are they being used properly, or are their skills being left untapped? Could some judicious transfers improve morale or performance? Since good staff members are essential to a successful library program, any director must make certain that the staff on hand is used as wisely as possible.

The new director must also begin immediately to advertise his presence in the community. Attending public functions, visiting shopping centers, and seeking out media appearances all help to remind the public that librarians are not only approachable but human as well. Actively seeking speaking engagements or even joining a local service club bring valuable attention to the library and library programs. The inevitable comments and conversations that spring from such activity help the new director to discover just how his constituency feel about the library and what new services or materials might be needed.

Obviously all this is an ongoing process, but it must begin immediately. Sitting behind a desk provides a certain amount of security and stability in a new position, but few people ever see a director tucked away in a secluded office. Getting out of the office and out of the library are equally as important as desk time. Watching and participating in library operations on all levels provide data and experience for any future recommendations for change.

All new directors come to the job with some preconceived ideas about how "their" library should be run. Only the wiser directors take the time

to study the library thoroughly before instituting those changes which will truly benefit the community, the library, and the staff. Staff and patrons typically resent changes immediately forced upon them by the "new guy," no matter how desperately the changes may be needed. Changes should be made only after allowing time for honest study and for involving the staff and Board in the planning and implementing process. Changes endorsed by the staff and Board are enthusiastic changes, easily defended against criticism, and often seen as "our" changes.

The director's first year is not going to be an easy year. It involves too much giving, too much concentration, too much learning to be much fun. Inherited troublesome situations need immediate resolution. Daily, weekly, monthly, and advance planning must be carried on as usual. The new director can make that first year much easier by realizing that deliberately following a policy or study and familiarization will yield future years of informed, realistic decisions and actions. Getting to know is perhaps not the most flamboyant or headline-producing policy, but it is the best long-term policy.

David Eisen