

Libraries
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WGVU's Jennifer Moss:

Your'e listening to Tilting the Earth's Praxis, a weekly discussion of important issues that impact civil society. With host Salvatore Alaimo.

Salvatore Alaimo

The famous author, Sidney Sheldon, said, "Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve and contribute to improving our quality of life. Libraries change lives for the better." So that's our topic this week on Tilting the Earth's Praxis. We're going to talk about the role of libraries in civil society. My guests are Lessa Pelayo-Lozada. She is the president of the American Library Association, former executive director and president of the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association. And she also received the American Library Association, Elizabeth Futas Catalysts for Change Award. Welcome Lessa.

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

Hi, everybody.

Salvatore Alaimo

Ana Drown is the branch manager of the Grand Rapids Public Library. She's one of our two Grand Valley State University alumni. On the show today, she got her master's of higher education administration and also a bachelor's of psychology, both from GVSU. Welcome Ana. And we also have Heather Zeoli, the other GVSU alum. She is director of development and volunteer services at the Metropolitan Library System of Oklahoma County. She got her master's in public administration, focusing on nonprofit management and leadership and her bachelor's in communication in English, both from Grand Valley State University. Welcome, Heather. So Lessa, let's start with you, the perspective you have from the association. What is going on in the world of libraries these days? What is that macro level context you can help set for us to, to get our topic going today?

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

Sure. So I think that right now we're in a very exciting time for libraries, as well as one of the most challenging times that we have ever been in. I think that the exciting part for us comes, you know, coming out of COVID and reimagining again and what our services look like and what our world looks like. You know, we're a lot of folks still think of us as just that space that only has books. But we know that we are so much more and that we are that last free third space that our communities have. It's not work, it's not home. It is someplace where you can go to be creative, to create community, to learn and enhance

your life. You know, we're looking at small business development and libraries and still building and increasing literacy. You know, we know that one in five adults have low literacy skills and cannot complete tasks that require comparing and contrasting information, paraphrasing or making low level inferences. And libraries are here for that, that public libraries are figuring out how to exist in an increasingly digital world and an increasingly hybrid world where we're not always able to be together. So that's the really exciting part. But the challenging part, as I'm sure so many of your listeners know, is that we are in a time of book challenges. We are seeing unprecedented numbers of book challenges across the country, and we know that they are not the challenges of the past. But challenges aren't new to us. They are a part of our work. That's why we have policies on how to do these things and how to receive challenges and how to talk to people about our collection development practices. But right now, we're seeing organized, political driven attacks against libraries, against library workers to create an environment where our trust is being diminished because people do see us as trusted institutions. So, we can get more into all of that later. But that's what I'm really seeing right now in this year during my presidency and also, of course, as a public librarian working the reference desk in my community.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, Ana, you're at the Grand Rapids Public Library. Can you give us a sense of what, what's the day in the life of a branch manager there?

Ana Drown

So typical day, I think it depends, right? I think every day is a little bit different. You know, the library is open public space so people can come in and, um you know, for a variety of things, it's not just checking out books, but a lot of what I see at my particular branch is people coming in for computer assistance, needing help with a new phone that they just bought, a smartphone. We do a lot of printing services, copies, faxes, and just kind of helping people navigate whatever it is that they're trying to navigate at that time. So, a lot of the applications online helping fill applications for school as well as kind of like your typical library stuff. So, checkouts accounts of yeah, there's a wide variety of things we see.

Salvatore Alaimo

So Heather, your job is to raise money. For the library, right?

Heather Zeoli

Correct, yes.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, describe to us what is the value proposition of the library that you have to convey to make someone want to donate their money and contribute?

Heather Zeoli

That's a good point. I think the diversity of how libraries are funded throughout the United States presents a unique challenge in understanding the funding needs. There

are some libraries that are funded by a city, some funded through federal dollars or state dollars. Where I work in Oklahoma County. All of our libraries are funded through a millage, through property tax. So historically, comparatively to other institutions of our size, we're well funded library system. And so, the proposition can be a little challenging because folks see, oh, your library is well funded. Well, it may be true today. However, where we are, we currently have 19 library locations. We're about to add a 20th. We've heard several other city leaders in the cities within our county request libraries. The cities can build those buildings for us, but we're responsible for the staffing and the materials and resources inside and as well so as saying the scope of libraries is changing today. So, it's not just funding traditional books, it's finding pathways for funding unique positions, having collaborations with social work programs, having unique collaborations with housing and development and food services to help not only provide a third space, but a safe landing space for folks that just really need help closing the gap. And so, funding isn't just the traditional model of books and records and story time. It's a little bit more today.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, can I assume that that's part of the messaging that you've got these third party databases. You've got some tech issues that and even the libraries themselves have changed. They're more like community centers now. Right. So you're not just funding for buildings or for content, you're funding for other things. What's that like to do? Is there a narrative that you use to try to get that across?

Heather Zeoli

Sure. I think, you know, libraries today are the community centers of many communities. It doesn't matter how large or how small. Folks count on the library to be open. They count on it to be able to get resources. So relating to people, the importance of the freedom to read, the freedom for independent learning, the freedom to have a safe space, and that continued access to materials for all. I'll be honest, living in Oklahoma, sometimes that is a challenging proposition because many folks don't agree on what those services are. You know, your traditional library, why are you providing hygiene products to citizens for menstrual services? Well, we're not providing them. We're partnering with a nonprofit that provides them for free, because, again, we want to be seen as the central hub for access for community services and needs. We have a tool lending program. We have a seed library. We've talked about having a fix up your bike clinic. You know, these are very normal things happening in libraries throughout America today. It's not just coming in and getting your books, although we'll always keep doing that, too, because that's important.

Salvatore Alaimo

Now, Lessa, I want to swing back to you and build off of Heather's comments, because I seem to recall many years ago the predictors and prognosticators saying that with the advent of the Internet that this was going to be the death knell for libraries. But I also have read that usage is at an all-time high. So, help us understand what's going on.

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

Yeah, I mean, when I started library school, a number of people, including one of my professors, was like, you don't want to go into public libraries because they're not going to exist throughout the entirety of your career. And I was like, we'll see about that. And, I think really what we've seen happen is that with the advent of the Internet, with the advent of e-books, it's not that folks aren't using the library. It's just they're using them in different ways. You don't have to go into a physical space to be able to use it. Right? As we saw during the pandemic, those physical spaces weren't always available for patrons to be able to go in and use our resources. So, we've had to figure out different ways to approach and find patrons where they are. And that's been part of our work for a really long time. All that is, is outreach. We're just doing digital outreach now, essentially by making sure that we're having programs that are accessible and resources that are accessible. But, we also have to recognize that just because somebody has access to a digital resource doesn't mean that they know how to use it, or it doesn't mean that they know how to download that book. You know, a lot of what we do in public libraries, and I'm sure Ana can speak to this as well, is helping folks figure out how to set up an email account that is still a very common. Think you know how to do an e-health visit, how to download that book. A lot of folks like you have e-books. You know, we're constantly sharing what we do. And, and I think that there's also this false understanding that children are born with phones in their hands. Not every child is born with some kind of device in their hand. So that digital divide is still really large and we're here to help bridge that gap.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, Ana, what about GRPL? Is usage up with you guys, too? And do you do you see some of the same issues that Les is talking about?

Ana Drown

Sure. So, I think especially during the pandemic, I think a lot of our digital resources are e-books or audiobooks on our apps. Really, all of those really increased in usage, obviously, because the buildings are closed, physical checkouts went way down. But I think the number of patrons that continue to still use those after realizing how accessible they are, how easy it is to use from home. We have one of our regular patrons at my branch is a mail carrier and was so excited to learn that they could cancel their audible subscription and use their library card and listen to books while they're walking in the neighborhood and delivering mail. And of course, you know, that's always an option even if we're not in a pandemic. But I think people have been able to see how accessible it is and how it can, you know, adapt and be beneficial to their life. And, even going off of what both Lessa and Heather said, like, you know, libraries are a great place to read and they're a great place to get physical books. But there's a lot of just basic things that patrons come in the library for. We see a patron on a regular basis who comes in and charges his phone and reads the newspaper for two or 3 hours every day and doesn't ever check out anything. And that's okay. But I think for him, we're a space where he's able to come and do that, and it's also a space that he can come in and he knows where he wants to sit and he sits in the same spot. And so I think it's really hard

sometimes to quantify that, but I think it really speaks to the libraries as a space that people feel as their space and as a community center and a place to enjoy yourself and also to get things done if you need to.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, yeah, you know, Ana, you remind me of something else in a world that's full of constant noise. Is the library sometimes a sanctuary for someone to come to and have a quiet space to be able to focus and contemplate and simply read and relax?

Ana Drown

I think it can be at times. So, we have moments during the day where things slow down, um, but there's also times that, you know, moms will come in with their kids and their kids are, you know, we have a designated children's space. So, there's some toys over there. We have a really cool like grocery store. Of course, there's books over there. But I think, you know, the idea that when you come in, you have to be absolutely silent the entire time that you're there. At least in my branch, I can't speak for every library, but I think at my branch that's not something that is super, we're not super strict about because kids are enjoying the space, just like the person on the computer is enjoying the space. Of course, we want everyone to be safe and, you know, use an inside voice. But what that inside voices always is varies on the child. But I think for the most part, I think the people who are in there and they are working on things quietly, they I think there's just a general understanding of like they're over in the kids area, they're enjoying themselves. Just like I'm over here at this table working quietly and I've seen people put earbuds in and, you know, that might help them focus a little bit more. But I really, you know, due to the size of my branch, it's pretty small. I think people really give each other grace and understand, like, we're all here using the space for what we need it for. And I've I think I've really been excited to tell kids, like, it's okay, you don't have to be absolutely silent in the library. It's okay to talk, it's okay to laugh. It's okay to say, Hey, come check out this cool toy, you know? And I think that really helps kids feel like that's a space that they're able to explore without having to have gatekeepers in the way of that. So yeah, I think sometimes it can be quiet, but not not as much as you would traditionally think.

Salvatore Alaimo

Let's shift gears to literacy. I'm just going to mention three. So there's just plain old literacy, right? The ability to read and write. There is media literacy. Well, excuse me. Let's go to four. There's digital literacy and then there's information literacy. Right? That's a lot. What can you say about the role that libraries play in enhancing our literate literacy abilities in these areas? Let's go, go to you first, Heather.

Heather Zeoli

I am so glad you brought this up, because I think that really is part of the crux here in the shift of libraries. Several years ago, I read an article that said libraries were having an existential crisis about their existence in light of the digital age. And there might be some truth to that. But really, it's about us globally learning not just to read, but learning how to use the tools that we have, how to discern information through channels. And

what are my biggest fears and all of this conflict that we have currently is that we are losing our critical thinking skills and abilities. We you know, you had mentioned there seems to be some myth that all children are born with a phone in their hand. True. Not true. You know, my daughter is 12. We got her a cell phone in the pandemic so she would stop using mine. And it really is a lot of work to not only learn how to use it, but what is proper social media etiquette, what is proper email etiquette? And when we are all playing by the same rules and the rules are constantly changing. It's difficult to know. And we also seem to be in an odd place in our culture where we, we are confident who should make those rules. So it becomes it becomes a real, a real challenge to provide all of those tools and services just for literacy in addition to everything else we've talked about.

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

I think that goes back to what you said earlier. Also, Heather, though, that, you know, folks in your region, but also I think in many different regions, don't agree on what the library should be right now. Right? And we don't agree on what critical thinking looks like. We don't agree on what the society that we want to live in looks like. And so, as libraries, we are promoting these literacies to ensure that our patrons can make their own choices, right, with the right choices for them and their family and not infringe on the rights of another person. And I think that, you know, kind of that democratic basis of libraries, which we didn't necessarily start as you know it like, I think it's really important to recognize the evolution of libraries also to becoming inclusive spaces rather than being kind of like these classist institutions that did moralize and were there to teach quote, people how to be in a society. You know, I think that if we can just really use our libraries as these community spaces in the context of these different literacies and how we want to be in our own lives and share that with each other. I think that's one of the great things about libraries, is the ability to build community and have those conversations so that you may not necessarily agree, but you can come out stronger and more understanding and empathetic and be able to, you know, not necessarily walk in someone's shoes, but maybe understand a little bit better what that looks like.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, I'm going to read a quote that kind of builds off of what you just said there, Lessa. This is from President John F Kennedy. He said, "If this nation is to be wise as well as strong, if we are to achieve our destiny, then we need more new ideas from more wise men reading more good books and more public libraries. These libraries should be open to all except the censor. We must know all the facts and hear all the alternatives and listen to all the criticisms. Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors for the Bill of Rights is the guardian of our security as well as our liberty." So, my question was, is our librarians now wearing another hat and they're becoming advocates, social activists on top of being librarians?

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

I think that's kind of always been part of our job. I think that maybe we just didn't look at it as being an activist. You know, one of the things that I usually say is that when I started library school, I never saw myself as any kind of advocacy or even activist or

even an advocate. And when I say that folks who know me and have kind of been on my journey with me laugh a little bit because it's entrenched in all that we do. We advocate for our communities no matter who they are or what type of library we're in. And I think that right now, as we are facing censorship challenges head on, that, that activism is what folks are seeing and what many may be reacting to, that they think that something that we have always done might carry opposing points of views in a library is something that's new, but it's not new for us. It's part of our mission and part of what we have always done and will always do.

Salvatore Alaimo

What about you, Heather, on your libraries facing any issues that we keep reading about over controversial content communities, maybe trying to dictate what titles you should carry and what you shouldn't have either of you encountered any of this?

Heather Zeoli

I'll step in here. Yeah. So, we had a leadership meeting of our, our library staff yesterday, and we found out that we have some citizens that are hiding book titles among the stacks. So, they're pulling things that they feel present, a directed agenda, perhaps a liberal agenda or an agenda that doesn't align with their values. And so they're hiding those books. We're recovering them. We're putting them back. Oklahoma state-wide has had some significant challenges. There have been some libraries that are no longer allowed to have displays of books with content on the cover. You know, I'm sure we all remember back in the 1980s and nineties, romance cover star Fabio with his hair, his very great bare chest. Books like that still exist today. And we have a library system in Oklahoma that has been forbidden to put them out on display. It's considered pornographic in some way. This year there were don't quote me, but it was several dozen House bills presented in the state of Oklahoma that wanted to limit what we were doing the most. Reasonable, of which would be that we would review all of the materials in our collections and that we would separate anything that could not or should not be seen by someone under the age of 16, and that certain materials would be locked up and only library staff could access them and they could only access them and pull them out for minors when they had written parental permission for each individual item. So logistically, that would be very cumbersome. When we did an analysis of the work that it would take to do that, it was over \$1,000,000,000, which would absolutely decimate all libraries. Like I said, ours is. We're very grateful for our funding system, but we know that other libraries don't have that. And. And again, what's the point? We already have categories. I remember stumbling into the Belding public library when I was 12 and getting an adult Judy Blume novel, *Wifey Instead of Tiger Eyes*, because I just thought it was the next Judy Blume novel. It was very much for adults, and I had a lot of questions for my mother, but it was a helpful conversation and sometimes we read things we aren't really meant to read and it helps us have that conversation. So yeah, we've had some serious struggles, we've had some challenges, you know, and as it relates to everything that we're trying to provide and everything that we're trying to do, you know, we try to provide safe spaces. We tried to provide connections to mental health services, we tried to provide education, and the challenges we face are all directly related to things.

Ana Drown

So yeah, so I think in terms of my specific library system, the number of challenges that we've received, I think in comparison to other West Michigan Public Library systems has been pretty minimal. You know, with that being said, we do see, like Heather was mentioning occasionally will come across books that have been intentionally placed out of out of sight, if that, if you will. So books that maybe are board books for children, picture books for children will be kind of hit in, hidden away, hopeful, I think, in the hope that they won't be accessed by children, you know. But I think one of the things that came to mind while you were talking, Heather, was that, you know, at the core of what the issue is, is that we want to protect our children. And I think sometimes, you know, as parents, it's really difficult to do that. Right. I'm a mom. I have two children myself. I have a 15 year old daughter and a 12 and a half year old son. And so I think during the pandemic, it really opened my eyes because they too got cell phones at that time, so they would stop using mine and my husband's. But I think one of the things that I think about when I hear the book bans and when I'm learning about, you know, all of the, the I guess just kind of the. The pressure, I guess that's put on library staff and library systems in general to, to kind of be that shield when really, you know, like we were talking about earlier this the media and the Internet literacy and you know social media. Right? Like, I think that there's so many things out there on the Internet that we could direct our efforts and our energy towards and equipping children with like, you know, the proper ways to engage with, with individuals that you may not know. Right? I think there could be a lot more benefits to kind of focusing in on that, because there's so much in that little handheld device that they could access that could be potentially be so much more dangerous than anything they could ever find in a book. Right? Maybe uncomfortable conversations will commence, but I don't think there's any risk to their safety, you know, and I think that books are a way that kids can kind of learn about those things and hopefully bring those questions to their parents. But I think in the later, you know, in the in the way of digital apps and social media, I think there's so there's so many opportunities for that conversation to not happen between parents and maybe or kids in a trusted adult that, you know, I just don't think we would see with a with a book, you know. And I had those conversations with my mom. I remember reading *A Chicken Soup for the Soul* book, and that was how I learned that Santa wasn't real. And I was I was a little bit shocked. And it was a book that probably was well beyond my, my grade level. But thinking back to it, I, I remember thinking like, man, I'm so embarrassed because I for the longest was the only friend in my group. I was like, You guys, it's real. He's real. And it opened that door for me to realize like, okay, he's not. But like, I understand the concept of that story. And I was able to tell my mom and I was very devastated, of course, but I'm grateful that I had that experience in the privacy of my bedroom reading a book, and I could go tell my mom about it rather than learning about it out there on the web, if you will. So, yeah, I think we're lucky. I think we haven't seen as much as much pushback, as much, you know, community pressure and really tension about book bans, thankfully, at the at the public library that I'm at. But, we are very aware that it is happening to a lot of our neighbors and library systems that are just a drive away from us experiencing, you know, budget cuts and staff, you know, kind of having to really advocate for themselves when we should be advocating for our for our

community. But really, this trying to, to show the community that we, you know, we're so much more than maybe a few of few books or the content that can be found in a few books.

Heather Zeoli

So, I think what what you're saying about, you know, libraries, staff and staff resources, going back to what I said about staff and staff resources, I think there's also a huge crisis in hiring qualified staff in libraries because of the change in the shift in libraries. We have some folks that have a concept of what library service is based on a model that may be outdated. And then we have other folks that are coming into the library with different expectations. I've I've had a woman in my office crying, a person just crying and saying, I didn't go to school this long and get a master's degree to wipe human feces off of a bathroom stall wall. And I know you probably didn't, but this is the job, you know, and having people yell at you, be in your face, try and challenge your personal values or how you book as an individual and what their perceptions are of you. I know that some folks may encounter that working in the front lines of McDonald's or Target as well. But we don't expect that behavior in our libraries. And so starting to see that and the reflection of poor behavior in libraries as well as the challenges that come with staffing and funding, it can be a little disheartening sometimes for sure.

Salvatore Alaimo

And maybe that is part of the fallout of the ever evolving from just being a library to being that community center, right? You're going to have people from the community in all walks of life coming to use the library for various reasons. Lessa, I'd like you to comment on the importance of libraries playing a role in K-through-12 education, as well as higher education, uh, academic libraries, school libraries, public libraries as people go through their educational experience. What can we say about the libraries playing a role in all of that?

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

Yeah. I think that, you know, libraries play a role from 0 to 100 years old. Every step of the way. There is a library program or service or resource that is available for us. And I think that it is essential for every school library to have a certified school librarian in their school, because with that, that's where you get the foundation of critical thinking skills, right? That's where you start to develop these relationships of broadening your mind and understanding how other realities fit with your reality, as well as just digital literacy. Right? All the literacies that we talked about, those are the benefits of having that school librarian in that K through 12 environment. You know, I have visited a couple of school libraries during my course as ALA president this year, and the thing that always stood out to me was the students who were already in the library when I got there, because that was their safe haven and that was where they went multiple times a day. You know, they were getting a (inaudible) in the morning at lunch and then one to take home, or they were there because they loved it so much and were helping to sell books. And so I think that when you are able to cultivate that love of literacy and that love of learning at such an early age, it just continues with the individual through life, through into higher education. Right? Because I don't know who of us was able to get through

college without at least one visit to the library, you know, whether it was learning how to access articles and resources, how to cite something, getting that textbook that we couldn't afford, you know, to be able to copy the pages, our librarians, our lifeline through our entire educational journey and, you know, book ended and in between is where the public library comes into play also, you know, because we are part of that educational and that that learning journey, Um, I do want to just touch also on what Heather said about, you know, the lack of resources and the lack of preparation that we're really seeing in library workers and the, the environments that we're asking our library workers to be in right now. And I just want to mention, because you brought up the role of education, right. I think that these two are intertwined because we're seeing a breakdown of many social safety nets, many social services and resources, including a breakdown in the, the expectations of our education systems. Right? Our public education systems, the funding that we put into our public education systems. And we're seeing that broadened out into the library because we're one of the last folks standing, right? Because we're one of the last places there. And so when we don't have school librarians, you know, when we don't invest in our students, when we don't invest in mental health and physical health, it all goes to where that one safe space is and that is the library. So, we're seeing it as, I think, a social safety net for so many different areas of our lives in society.

Salvatore Alaimo

Let's let's build off those thoughts. What are you seeing at the association as being your I don't know, your top three or so issues that the association is engaging in an advocacy for on behalf of libraries? What are the current burning issues that that need the attention of the citizenry?

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

Yeah. The number one issue is, of course, book challenges and book censorship. You know, I went into this year, you know, when I when I ran for president, I decided to run in the summer of 2020. Right. So it was the peak pandemic. It was peak. Everybody was scared. There were no vaccines. Many of us were doing curbside service, afraid for our lives. Many people never even got to shut down. And so, I thought that that would kind of be the big focus of my presidential year, was figuring out how we can take the lessons that we learned during that very scary time and how we can make it better for ourselves moving forward. And so I think that's still one of the top three issues that we're looking at. But book censorship has kind of pushed everything else out of the way. But I think that the two are also intertwined, right? When we break down trust, we also break down the resources that are available to our staff. And then I think that we also are grappling with and it's related to both of them also, I think what does equity, diversity and inclusion and social justice look like in our libraries? What does it look like for us to be neutral or to be, you know, be trauma informed? What do these roles look like in the different communities we live in? Because we may all be doing the same thing, but we have to present it in different ways to make sure that our communities respond, understand and participate in our conversations. But the number one issue is kind of stop the presses. It's all book bans.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, Ana, does any of those things resonate with you at GRPL?

Ana Drown

Yeah, I think, you know, like a lot of the school librarians that reach out to us that we connect with, you know, our feeling really a lot of pressure just to try to figure out what to do next. I think in terms of what we are able to do as a public library looks a little bit different than what a school library might be a librarian might be asked to do, you know, because their direction obviously is coming from the school board and of course, their constituents there and within the school system. But I think just trying to be as open and responsive to the community as we can and just being transparent about, you know, what does the guidelines that we as a library system follow? What do those guidelines instruct us to do? And that's to provide access to information to people. You know, and if that information that we have isn't something that aligns with you, there might be something else that we offer that does. And so just making sure that we have a wide variety of information available, whether that be books, whether that be in our databases, you know, just making sure that we have a wide variety of things available to, to the community and offering, offering those digital literacy classes and helping people get access to information. And, you know, I think one of the things that that Lessa was mentioning that, you know, when we look at some of the programs that we offer or the different events that we try to put on it or even partner with, you know, I think it's it's really it's really important for us to consider that lens of like what, what does our community look like and what does our community want to see? You know, and I think it doesn't necessarily have to reflect me as a person or the library and the staff demographics. But what are the things out in the community that people are saying that they want more information about? And so I think, you know, just trying to be really open to community partnerships and making those connections with all different types of cultural organizations in different centers around the community to try to make sure that we're getting plugged in where we need to be plugged in and, you know, really uplifting the work that the community is doing because we can't do and lead every effort and do all the things, but we can most definitely be a bridge and helping people get connected to that information and, and, you know, those sources of support if it's not something that we're able to directly offer.

Heather Zeoli

I think some of the more fascinating things that have come out of libraries to offer that direct support have been collaborations with public health institutions, housing authorities. We partnered closely with the Homeless Alliance and different organizations in Oklahoma County. We partner with an organization called Pivot, which has a program called Safe Space, so that if you are a teen and you are at risk, you can come into any public library in Oklahoma County and tell a staff member, I need a safe space, and they will call the social worker at Pivot who will come and pick you up. And it's, you know, a little bit of training that we have to do for our staff. But it's a really great resource for, for teens who are going through crisis. And similarly, you know. I'm originally from West Michigan, moved to Oklahoma about nine years ago, and my first

day here I saw a woman in her full burqa with her husband in Walmart. And on the next aisle I saw a legit cowboy with a cowboy hat and spurs on his boots. It is the largest Vietnamese population outside of New York City in the United States, lives in Oklahoma City. There are a lot of Latino guests that come up from other places and stay here. And so there's also, you know, I'm sure you've seen the movie *Far and Away* with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman back in the day that depicted the land run on Oklahoma. There are many indigenous cultural tribes, issues, nations and the pride of the folks who can say that their grandfather staked the claim on the land back in 1890. And so the flash of all of that coming together in an area that's traditionally been conservative but is now shifting to be I don't know if I would say more liberal, but definitely more centrist is very, very interesting. And, and the pressure that that puts on libraries to ensure that when someone comes in, they can find a story in the library or something that is relevant to them, that matters to them. You know, it's not just having bilingual books or Spanish texts. It's having books in Vietnamese and it's having stories that represent LGBTQA plus communities. It's having stories that represent the black community at a higher level, especially with some of the history of black oppression in Oklahoma City and in the state of Oklahoma. So it's just unfortunate that not everybody can just walk on by like we used to back in the day at Blockbuster. If that movie is not for us, we're not going to check it out. But now we seem to think, Oh, that book is not for me. Well, it's not for anybody else either. And I don't know when that cultural shift happened sometime between 2010 and 2016, and that's probably a different podcast, but it's very, very fascinating.

Salvatore Alaimo

Yeah. You're reminding me of a question. I wanted to circle back to Lessa and ask. Ask you where? What is the current state or condition of libraries in terms of having the right technology and access for people with disabilities. Do you have a general? I know that's a maybe an unfair question to give a generalization for the whole country, but. But based on your experience at the association, what are you hearing and seeing, you know, in terms of the efforts to, to take care of that?

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

Yeah, I think it's fair to say that more can always be done. I think that some of the accommodations that were made during the pandemic that were very basic like hybrid availability, closed captioning during Zoom meetings, things like that were news to a lot of places and were kind of basic services that we probably should be offering. And so at the American Library Association, I think that we really recognize that this is an area that needs a lot more concerted effort. And so we've hired our first accessibility officer for the association, who is also going to help guide and update to the ALA standards for the disabled and disabled as well as other disabilities. So I think that that is kind of our next chapter. Not next chapter, right, because all these things are ongoing. But I think that we really need to increase when have an understanding of what universal design is, an understanding of what our commitment to those communities as well is, and how we can bring those communities into creating our services and to make them accessible to everyone.

Salvatore Alaimo

All right. So, I want us to close and we're going to let each of the three of you get a crack at this one looking into, out into the horizon the future of your work, specifically in the future of libraries in general. What are some of your items on your wish list? What do you hope to see in terms of the library as an institution or a hope to see in terms of society maybe embracing libraries differently? You get to pick. But let's start with you, Ana. What do you what do you, what do you hope to see with libraries moving forward?

Ana Drown

That's a very good question. And I think one of the biggest things that comes to mind for me and, you know, when I first started my role as a you know, as a branch manager at the library, I didn't I didn't have a library background. But one of one of the biggest things that appealed to me about the library was its ability to be able to increase access for people, whether that's children, whether that's, you know, the elderly. I think one of the things that I would like to see is, you know, for libraries to, to be viewed as an institution that that has done that for, for many, many, many years and will continue to do that. You know, I think that might look differently for every library system. But I think specifically for for my library, I think being able to articulate the work that we do. And so one of the things I'd like to see is that we're able to kind of share with the community the wide variety of things that we're able to offer the community and be able to kind of report out, if you will. Because I think, you know, we have programs, we have books. But I think it would be really powerful for folks to know, you know, that we we are there as a safety net for for, for children who come in and need help with their with their online classes or for people who are just out of prison and really need to apply for a job or need some assistance with an email because they've never had to use that before. So I think that's one of my biggest hopes is that, you know, I think library people know it, we feel it, we live it. And I just I hope even a fraction of the community can feel the pride that we do in the services and the things that we're able to offer our community. Because I think it's why a lot of people do it, and I think it's why a lot of people stick with it because we are essential. And I think it's something that, you know, we know. And I just I just hope the community can embrace that and continue to embrace that.

Salvatore Alaimo

Thank you, Heather, how about you?

Heather Zeoli

Yeah, I don't think we really knew exactly how essential we were until the pandemic happened and we had to pivot to curbside services. So, we had folks coming in and saying, but I just need a copy. I need to send a fax. I need I need to get on the computer just for a minute or I'm not going to be able to get my SNAP benefits this this time. You know, I'm hoping that the communities rise up in a couple of ways. One, it is sort of to your comment about, disabilities, and that is ensuring a way that our buildings are physically accessible and that a lot of our buildings throughout the country are out of date, don't meet the need for modern services. So, I'm hoping that communities see the value in these spaces and choose to collaboratively invest for what is that library of the

future? Is it a divided space that has a learning lab where we can be loud and we can play with things and we can experiment? And then a quiet reading space that's more traditional for others. Is it free office spaces for health and human services throughout the community? Is it partnering with our volunteers and agencies to provide that just something extra that we can't do on our own? So, I you know, I think libraries have a real opportunity to lead the way and lead the conversation by bringing things back to neutral and saying, hey, we're not going to fight about the books anymore. Here's who we are, here's where we are, here's what we need from you. But we're probably a few years in a couple of political elections away from being able to do that forward movement.

Salvatore Alaimo

So Lessa, you can have the final word. What do you want to see in the future in the world of libraries here?

Lessa Pelayo-Lozada

Oh, the pressure. Oh, I think I agree with everything Ana and Heather said. And I would add, you know, I want to see library institutions that invest in their library workers. I want to see library worker rights at the forefront of a lot of this, because a library, as we've said throughout this whole conversation, is nothing without the people who are out there checking out your books, helping you make that email address, helping you find the resources you need, teaching you how to use a 3D printer. All of these wonderful things that we do in libraries are not possible without library workers. So that's the first thing. I think also within that vein is I want to see libraries at the forefront of sustainability movements, right? We use a lot of resources, physical materials, digital materials in our spaces. And so, we need to make sure that we are also preparing our spaces to be around for future generations and really look at how we consume and kind of the triple bottom line of sustainability. And finally, I think that I just want us to be remembered as defenders and advocates of intellectual freedom. We have been for a long time, and we are in the middle of it right now. And when we come out on the other side in a couple of years, I know that when people are going to think of libraries, they're going to remember us as defending not just books, but the people whose stories are in those books.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, all of our listeners, when it's time to vote on the millage increase for your local public libraries, vote yes. So I want to thank our guests again. Lessa Pelayo-Lozada, president of the American Library Association. Ana Drown, branch manager at Grand Rapids Public Library. Heather Zeoli, Director of Development and Volunteer Services, the Metropolitan Library System of Oklahoma County. Thank you all for being on this episode of Tilting the Earth's Praxis. Please listen in next week for another interesting topic that impacts civil society.

Closing music

WGVU's Jennifer Moss

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Closing music fades.