

# What They Don't Tell You in Library School

by **Bessie Sullivan**

I was a starry-eyed student at the McGill Library School in the early '90s. I happily learned to catalogue (I aced that Dewey test by the way), puzzled over the notion of collections development, and embraced my inner techie as I built databases and conducted timed Boolean searches on what was a fairly new internet. Not once during that period did the reality of what it really meant to work in a public setting that is a library ever set in. Throughout the years I have found myself in situations that make me wonder about what I'd thought being a professional librarian meant. I recently polled my colleagues at Kingston Frontenac Public Library on the "things I never thought I would have to do as a librarian." From their suggestions and my own experiences, I've compiled a list of 10 observations:

## **1. PLUNGE TOILETS**

Although this seems so obvious ... you do it at home so why not at work? I guess I always thought there would be other people to do that. But with budget cuts and shrinking staff numbers there never seem to be any other people.

## **2. GATHER GROCERY CARTS**

I don't know what happens in your parking lots, but I often have abandoned grocery carts taking up spots in ours. My record for carts in a day is four ... from three different stores! The stores are very good about coming around with a truck and collecting the carts. But what truly amazes me is the time it takes to remedy the situation. First, I round up the carts. Next, I figure out which stores they are from. Then I wade through the web of hierarchy at said grocery stores to reach someone who actually cares. Finally, I impart the message that one of their carts has gone astray.

## **3. SELL THINGS**

We've all sold baked goods, tote bags, gift cards, and pens to raise money for our libraries. This constant quest for dollars through grants, community partnerships, fundraising, and the tax base is a reality. Yet the future need to embark on such a quest does not occur to the average library student. I, for one, always figured public libraries had money. Somehow it just magically appeared so that I would have a lovely place to work. Consequently I must thank all those taxpayers out there who provide a place for me to justify my expensive education.

#### **4. REMOVE BATS AND RODENTS**

One of the branches at Kingston Frontenac Public Library uses an old farm house. For the first few years bats kept finding their way into the branch. One evening I found myself armed with a bucket and a large piece of cardboard. I was swinging the bucket around in the general vicinity of the bat and somehow managed to snatch it out of the air. I clamped the cardboard over the bucket and released the bat outside. I had a student at the time who stood there watching. I think I heard him murmur "Impressive!" under his breath as the poor mammal got trapped in the bucket.

#### **5. MAN THE BAR**

A.k.a.: Prevent people from drinking in the library. Fellow public librarians, do you ever feel like a bartender? After one particularly blatant display of consumption of alcohol in our library, I found myself looking around to see what was on tap! Did I miss the announcement that we'd secured a licence? It might be an interesting way to add to revenue. Circulation desks kind of look like bars, don't they?

#### **6. BREAK UP FIGHTS**

Continuing on with the bar theme, I never pictured myself stepping into the middle of a brawl when I was studying the Dewey Decimal system. The strangest part about one of the fights I had to break up was that I'm certain the argument erupted over who was viewing more objectionable material on the public stations. "You are a pervert!" "No, you are!" "Oh yeah? Well I'm more of one than you!"

#### **7. SNIFF BOOKS**

Often I'm forced to see myself through the eyes of others. Our library received a particularly fragrant batch of books back from somewhere and I started sniffing them to identify the offending odour. You know ... to decide if I should discard them or if a good airing would remedy the problem. I was caught doing so by a student who had a very puzzled look on his face, as if to ask: "What are you doing?" I found myself explaining that books come back smelling of urine (I'm never sure if it's animal or human), smoke, mould, and many other things I can't even imagine. For some reason I'm compelled to sniff returned books. Judging from the response of my colleagues, I'm not alone.

#### **8. COLLECT CANS**

In our area, Habitat for Humanity collects aluminum cans. They sell them to purchase building materials. I collect cans from three branches and deliver them to Habitat in clear plastic bags. As a library student I could not have anticipated the place that the librarian occupies as a leader in the community. It seems to me that people in stable, safe houses are more likely to be library users. Why else would I spend my lunch hours delivering cans if it weren't to secure more patrons?

#### **9. MANAGE THE LOST AND FOUND**

Twice a year I go through the lost and found for three branches, wash the clothes, and donate them to the Salvation Army Thrift Store. As a student, it never occurred to me that recycling would be such a huge part of a librarian's job.

#### **10. CARE**

The 10th thing that I never thought I would do in my professional life was to care so profoundly for the communities and people I serve. Libraries and librarians play a much bigger role than I ever imagined as a student 15 years ago.

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is 2009 President of the Ontario Public Library Association. In her daily life, she is Chief Executive Officer of the Bruce County Public Library. She worked as a branch librarian for the Kingston Frontenac Public Library for almost 10 years. When she isn't rounding up shopping carts, she likes to read and be physically active.