

OLAQ

Volume 5 , Number 3

The Heart of a Librarian (Fall 1999) | Pages 10 - 11+

July 2014

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Miller, K. (2014). Creating a forum: Planning author events at the Tigard Public Library. *OLA Quarterly*, 5(3), 10-11+. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1527>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/olaq>

Creating a Forum: Planning Author Events at the Tigard Public Library

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I grew up in New York around writers because my mother and her cohorts were writers. The writing community in New York is immense in comparison to the more intimate writing community in Oregon. Directly after college, I moved to Portland and took a job in a small bookstore. Arriving in Oregon in 1992, I had never heard such names as Tom Spanbauer or Ursula Le Guin. How amazing it was to learn not only their names but also their faces, for they, among others, were regular customers at the store. Meeting authors was just one of the perks of working at the bookstore. Little did I know the value those exchanges would have in the career ahead of me.

Over the three years I worked at the bookstore, I tried to figure out what I wanted to do for a career. I realized that in many ways, I was doing the work I was cut out for. The library degree was, for me, a natural way to extend the love I had for helping customers find good books to read.

When I got out of library school I was sure that I wanted to work in an academic library. Most of my coursework had focused on the academic environment, and I believed that academic library work would be the most prestigious. Ironically, at the time I was applying, most of the jobs announced were public positions. Now, having

worked in a public library for a year and a half, I feel that I belong in the public sector. My bookstore background in popular literature and my familiarity with serving the general public are perfectly suited to the setting of the public library.

My job is threefold: I work on the reference desk, I do collection development for adult fiction, literature and non-fiction bestsellers, and I design programs for adult patrons. The reference work most closely mirrors the work I did before, especially when the questions involve readers' advisory. I lean heavily on my knowledge of the bookstore's inventory in readers' advisory as well as in my collection development duties. I find tremendous satisfaction in the three arenas of my position. But of all three, it is the work I have done implementing programs that has allowed me to soar both professionally and personally, as it's here that I find I most challenge myself and reap the greatest rewards, or conversely, the most significant let-downs. I find that planning these programs reveals a lot about who I am.

The 1998 season was the first opportunity I had to work on the six-week Adult Reading Program that Tigard Public Library offers every fall. The program's finale is a gala to which the patrons who have completed the program are invited. In the previous season, a precedent was set to have regional authors appear at the gala to speak to the guests. This time, it was up to me to arrange for the authors to appear.

It was easier than I imagined. The Adult Reading Program is a very popular one, and each year approximately seventy-five people receive invitations to come to the gala with a guest. We routinely have a turnout of over one hundred people for the event. Naturally, authors are thrilled to be asked to speak and sign books when you can guarantee them a sizable audience. So I was eager to offer authors the chance to participate. The only difficult part was choosing which authors to call.



Twenty-two people attended the Gregg Kleiner event. Here, Kate Miller is flanked by audience members during a discussion about *Where River Turns to Sky*.



Gregg Kleiner and Kate Miller enjoy the comments from the audience.

Joanna Rose, author of the novel, *Little Miss Strange*, was first. I chose her for a couple of reasons. Although *Little Miss Strange* was her first published novel, the book was a word-of-mouth hit in the Portland area, and Rose's name was quickly gaining recognition. In addition, as a former bookstore employee I knew that Joanna Rose was the publicist and literary programmer for Powell's books, and I hoped that she would empathize with me, a new librarian launching a literary program. As it turned out, Rose was thrilled to be asked to speak at the gala, and she gave me the names of several other authors she thought might also be interested. After talking with Rose, I felt closer to the center of the Oregon writing community than ever before. And within a couple of weeks, I had commitments from five authors to speak at the gala. But there was still much work to be done.

The entire project took place over four months. Coordinating the actual author appearances was only a part of the process. I arranged with a local bookseller to sell the authors' books at the gala. I helped plan a book-talk program to kick off the six week reading program in which we book-talked the gala authors' books to entice patrons to finish the program and attend the gala. And there was endless paperwork to prepare: publicity, handouts, surveys, etc. Planning a program of this scale required an enormous effort by a committee of staff members and volunteers. There were times when I felt engulfed, but I was also proud of all that was accomplished, and, along the way, I gained a sense of ownership of the process.

All of the preparation culminated that night in late November as the guests and authors began to arrive. I have memories of travelling with my mother when she went out on tour for a book. I remember the graciousness of the librarians and booksellers who hosted us, how enamored they were to be in the presence of my mother, the author. Now I was the enamored one meeting each of the authors, hosting them, introducing them before their speeches.



Gregg Kleiner reads from his book.

Each one got up and talked about how libraries had influenced their lives and their writing careers. Their words were potent, like a compelling sermon, writers talking to readers about the importance of libraries. It was magical to see how our readers were moved, spell-bound even. For me, it served as a poignant reminder of why I chose a career in this field. In my work as a librarian, I match people up with books I hope they will love, and, in doing so, I help to form connections between readers and writers. The gala offered me an opportunity to bring writers and readers together in a room. For Tigard Library readers, spending this time with the authors was a gift, a chance for them to feel kindred with a writer whose words they admired. That night, I felt I delivered a valuable service to our patrons.

After the gala, I was excited. I was sure that a congregation had been created, and that these patrons would show up in droves to attend author readings and subsequent events at the library. I immediately booked Floyd Skloot, an Oregon Book Awards nominee, to read from his novel and talk about his experience as a book reviewer at *The Oregonian*. As a bonus, I asked him to preview a selection of books soon to be reviewed.

I went all out with publicity. I wrote an article for the local paper, *Cityscape*, and listed it in the monthly calendar. I reviewed the novel, *The Open Door*, for a local paper called *The Regal Courier* and mentioned the event. I got it listed in the *Willamette Week* and in two separate listings in *The Oregonian*. I created a knockout poster with Skloot's photograph and distributed it to bookstores and the senior center, as well as around the library. I phoned a number of the gala guests to invite them personally. I implored my friends, my family, my coworkers, and members of my writing group to attend.

The event was scheduled for 7:00 p.m. on a Thursday evening. At 7:05 I had the circulation staff make a final announcement over the P.A. and then I told Mr. Skloot to go ahead and get started. There were seven people in the room, including two other staff members, Skloot, his wife and myself. It was a wonderful program, and Floyd Skloot was remarkably gracious to go on with it, though I could tell he was discouraged. For my part, I was mortified because it seemed to be such a waste of his time. I apologized to him, and made a commitment to myself to find another avenue, a way to prevent what happened to Skloot from happening to other authors. I decided that I would spend the winter gathering an audience. Only after the formation of a dedicated group, would I invite another writer to the library.

One of my goals had been to start a book discussion group. A number of patrons had requested it, but I

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had been so busy working on the Adult Reading Program events, that I had not had time to organize it. In January, I began by putting out calls to those interested to attend a planning meeting, which resulted in a group of twelve planners who came together in February. At this meeting, we decided to meet once a month and to read primarily general fiction but also popular non-fiction. I proposed that we read books written by local authors on a quarterly basis, and promised I would arrange for those authors to attend the discussions. They agreed with this proposal.

The book group has proven to be a solid program. I have a mailing list of over twenty people. On average, twelve show up for a meeting. In June, I have scheduled Gregg Kleiner to facilitate the discussion of his novel *Where River Turns to Sky*. It tells the story of six strangers who take up residency in a ramshackle mansion in order to live their final days with company and dignity. I expect an engaging discussion, and I have my fingers crossed that there will be people there to participate in it. I have done the publicity. I have designed the poster. I have told my family and friends. I have told the discussion group members to bring their families and friends. But whether or not I fill the house, I am secure knowing that there are twelve to twenty people out there reading Kleiner's book who will have a vested interest in attending. And I am confident that they will.

In a year and a half, I have had triumph and heartache in my work implementing literary programs at the Tigard Library. The Adult Reading Program was an invigorating way to begin my work, but the overwhelming success of the gala set me up for disappointment in implementing programs on a smaller scale. The Adult Reading Program is an established program, and the gala is a lavish affair. For many of our adult patrons, the six-week program may be the only time all year they commit to reading. The Skloot event suffered because it fell outside of the Adult Reading Program. And yet, professionally, it is necessary for me to develop signa-

ture programs that do not fall within the Adult Reading Program. Involving writers in library programs is, for me, at the core of literary programming. Thus, my challenge has been to find a way to motivate patrons to attend other author-related events at the library.

I am hoping the book discussion group will provide an additional venue for hosting authors at the Tigard Library. For Gregg Kleiner's visit, I decided to have the author facilitate the discussion of his own book. In the future, I would also like to have authors facilitate discussions of books they love by other authors rather than their own books. Although the discussions will probably not have the grandeur of the gala event, I am excited to be able to offer book group members the chance to gather around a table for a discussion with an author. In an intimate setting, I hope to foster a sense of familiarity between the book group members and the community of writers.

As a bookstore clerk, I was enchanted to discover my own proximity to this region of writers. As a librarian, I work to introduce library patrons to books written by local authors. Part of this work involves creating opportunities for readers to meet with the authors of books they've enjoyed. Devising this forum has been difficult, but it has caused me to scrutinize both my methods and my reasons for pursuing it. I have discovered that providing this service to Tigard patrons is the fundamental mission of my work, and that the process of making it happen is essential to my development as a librarian. It causes me to discover my passions in the field. As I carve out my niche in the profession, I begin to recognize myself, and to realize how my own identity is intrinsically linked to the kind of librarian I continue to become. ■

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