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Guns and America and the Library and Us: What We Learned from the Worst Library Program ... Ever!

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BARRATT MILLER

Barratt started her library career at Crook County Library in 2012 after graduating from the iSchool at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She's been the Youth Services Librarian at Oregon City Public Library since 2016. In her spare time, Barratt makes extremely complicated friendship bracelets and caters to the whims of her tiny dog.



JANE SCHEPPKE

Jane first came to Crook County Library in 2013 as a fresh graduate of the University of British Columbia iSchool. She was promoted to Assistant Director in 2016. In her spare time, Jane is an avid writer and digital multimedia artist. She also likes to hide Animal House references in professional papers.

Introduction

BARRATT: On a dark and stormy night in Prineville, fifty members of the community gathered in Crook County Library's meeting room. The program facilitator walked in the door five minutes before go-time. The Assistant Director introduced him to the room. And then all hell broke loose. The program topic? *Guns and America*.

JANE: Barratt was that Assistant Director. I was also there. Yes, *Guns and America* was, as the Canadians say, a real gong show. The participants disrespected Barratt, the presenter, and each other. Voices were raised. Racist accusations were thrown. At one point the presenter wrote the verbatim text of the 2nd Amendment on the whiteboard, and people accused him of lying. It was horrible.

To a large extent this is Barratt's story, in that she was the primary mover and shaker for the program. This is not to cast blame; it was hella brave of her to attempt this topic in Prineville. For my part, I just sat there with my arms crossed over my center mass and tried to look very small while people screamed and yelled. I am a coward.



BARRATT: No you're not. It was self-protection. Also, you were there as a community member and not as a library staff member. You had a different role to play in that situation.

JANE: I am a cowardly lion. But I am also the person who succeeded Barratt as the Assistant Director at Crook County Library when she moved on to Oregon City. I experienced this from both ends, and it's been my privilege to see how this has played out for our organization in the long term.

BARRATT: It was a valuable (if horrible) learning experience for everyone involved. So let's make like Miss Manners and talk about the do's and don't's of hosting a politically charged program!

Choosing Your Program

Guns and America was offered as part of the Conversation Project series of community discussion programs given by Oregon Humanities. Conversation Project programs are intended to be open-ended discussions run by a trained facilitator who is an expert in the topic at hand. The facilitator creates a neutral space, but political conversations that occur within the boundaries of civil, productive conversation often arise and are not discouraged. In general, these programs are extremely well-run and well-received. Both of our current libraries have done and continue to do Conversation Projects. We would recommend these programs for any library.

While programs centering on contentious topics can be intimidating, they fill a necessary role in public library services. In order for such programs to be successful, however, library staff members have to do some additional legwork when selecting a topic and preparing to host a program.

- Who are the people in your community? What values do they hold dear? Is your community more homogenous in terms of beliefs and background, or is there more diversity?
- What are the main social and service groups in your community? To what extent are they politically active?
- How do your own values align with those of the community? Do you read as an “insider” or an “outsider?”
- What role does the library play in the community? How do individuals and community groups interact with the library? What story is the library trying to tell?

If you're an outsider in a largely homogenous community, you'll need to be especially vigilant about preparing for the program. At the time, our library staff consisted mostly of young, hipsterish women who grew up outside of our rural community of hunters, sportsmen, and 2nd Amendment activists. If we'd asked ourselves these questions beforehand, we would have learned a lot about the topic and our community.

Even if you feel like you're operating in your comfort zone, you need to prepare for all eventualities.



Choosing Your Facilitator

Additionally, your program must be led by someone who has training and experience with facilitating discussion groups or workshops. Just because you can lead a staff meeting or talk down an angry patron at the desk does not mean you can mediate conflict in a room of strangers. If you have examined you and your library's place in the community and have found it to be deficient—for example, if you don't have a relationship of trust and collaboration established with local groups, or if you don't feel a part of the community—outside facilitators are a must.

Not all outside facilitators will be prepared to lead a program exploring contentious topics, however. Here are some attributes to look for when choosing a facilitator:

- **Training and experience working with large groups.** This is essential. Specific training in conflict mediation is super double secret essential. Be sure to ask the presenter if they have presented on this topic before.
- **Active listening skills.** Your presenter must be able to listen attentively and compassionately, building on and centering on comments made by the attendees.
- **Expertise in the topic.** This might look different depending on the presentation; a program dealing with issues related to law or medicine requires a different threshold of expertise than one on local food culture.
- **An interest in your community and the people who live there,** especially if the presenter is from outside your service area. A new strategy employed by Oregon Humanities is to have the facilitators ask the hosting library for local news stories or background on current community issues.
- **A plan for establishing ground rules, presenting background information, and guiding the group discussion in a way that is accessible to all participants.** If you're having difficulty contacting your facilitator to discuss these issues before the program, you're in big trouble.

It's not enough for your presenter to say, "Yes, I have these qualities!" If you can't establish an active dialogue, or if they're unable to provide details about how they plan to address challenges that could arise before or during the program, then you need to find someone who can.

We highly recommend Oregon Humanities' requirement that presenters arrive early at the site of the program. This is a great opportunity for last-minute discussions between the facilitator and the hosting library, and for the presenter to establish a rapport with participants as they arrive.

The -ism Factor

This one's hard.

During *Guns and America*, a few members of the audience saw fit to directly question the citizenship of the presenter. The presenter was African-American. That was the macroaggression in an atmosphere thick with microaggressions. We weren't prepared for racism to enter the conversation, and we didn't give the presenter the support he needed in that moment.



Prejudice tends to rear its head during moments of conflict. If you feel that you, your library, or your facilitator lack the skills to adequately navigate those moments when and if they arise, you need to arrange adequate staff and facilitator training prior to the program.

Even if you don't want to plan a discussion program around a hot topic, training in mediating conflict and addressing racism, sexism, homophobia, and other prejudice in your institution is essential. It will empower your staff and help create a welcoming space for all members of your community.

Promoting Your Program

Storytelling isn't just for story time. Effective marketing of library programs and services is all about narrative—you've got your setting (the library—is it friendly, official, quiet, active, or some combo of all of these?), your characters (the staff and the patrons—who are they?), and a plot (all the stuff you're doing) driven by themes (your vision and mission statements). Marketing your program is a matter of integrating it into the ongoing story of your library. If you can't make it fit, its purpose will be ignored or misunderstood by the community.

If you haven't thought about your marketing in this way before, start right now. Crook County Library switched to a more narrative-driven marketing strategy post-*Guns and America*, and it's worked well. Even libraries who have adopted this approach for years should consider the following points when marketing a program with the potential for controversy:

- What's the story we have already been telling? Who's been hearing it? Do they buy in?
- How do people in the community get their information?
- Where on social media are conversations about the library happening? How does your library know about these conversations?
- What kind of images or ad copy do you use in your marketing? We recommend neutral ad copy and images that resonate with your community but aren't provocative for the sake of being provocative. Actual photos of your community, rather than stock photos, are best.
- How much control do you need to have over your messaging? If you market your program with a press release, you may be contacted by media outlets that exert their own editorial control. Don't be afraid to turn down PR opportunities if there is a risk that your message could be distorted or misinterpreted.
- If you decide to give an interview about the program, are you the best person to speak on behalf of the organization in this situation? Whatever you do, don't start talking to the reporter when they call you the first time! Ask them if you can get back to them and prepare, prepare, prepare—talk to the facilitator, talk to your boss, do your research and have additional resources ready.

There were a lot of ways we failed when planning this program, but our marketing fail was heinous. Our marketing image was a big ol' gun. Someone whose name rhymes with carrot gave an ill-advised interview in which she used the phrase “gun control” in an inappropriate context. Wherever the conversation took off before we opened the doors that fateful night, it didn't happen within earshot of the library.



Security

If you sign up for an Oregon Humanities program in 2017 (and, if we haven't been perfectly clear, we still totally think you should), you will receive a thick packet with all of the resources you'll need to carry out a successful Conversation. Thanks in part to us, one of the first documents in that packet is a letter strongly suggesting that program hosts that anticipate crowds or conflict should consider hiring outside security staff.

Everyone in attendance at your program—staff, patrons, facilitators, innocent bystanders—deserves to feel safe from both a physical and emotional standpoint. This is a matter of both training and material support.

- Is the space in which your program will be held safe and appropriate? With discussion programs, it is standard practice to have the participants sit in a circle. How many people can you accommodate in this arrangement? Is the space welcoming? If you did have to evacuate the space in an emergency, what's the plan?
- Would outside security fit with the story you're telling about your library? Your security choices send a message. Depending on your community and the topic, security could make people feel safe, or it could make them feel threatened.
- If you decide to hire security officers, how will they present themselves? Will they wear uniforms or plain clothes? Will they be in the room or at the entrance, or on call?
- How will you communicate with local law enforcement? You'll need to ask yourself this question whether or not you use hired security personnel.
- How will you or the program leader establish the rules and the consequences of breaking them with attendees? Who will enforce them? If your staff or facilitators aren't comfortable enforcing those consequences, you need to find someone who can.
- What are the rules for public buildings in your community, especially rules related to weapons?

When we hosted *Guns and America* at Crook County Library, we didn't know that Oregon Humanities offered security support for Conversation Projects on contentious topics. While our county sheriff was instrumental in keeping the (relative) peace, we would have gladly taken outside security if we'd known it was available. Depending on the relationship the library and the community have with local law enforcement, it may not be wise to have a police presence unless absolutely necessary.

Err on the side of caution. If you're on the fence about hiring security personnel, hire them.

Evaluating Outcomes

It wouldn't be an *OLAQ* article if we didn't talk about outcomes-based evaluation. It's a helpful tool for assessing whether or not your program did what you wanted it to do, and to determine if you succeeded in integrating your program into the overall story of your library.

For programs of *Guns and America's* ilk, it's not a numbers game. A lot of our mistakes were driven by a desire to finally have an adult program with decent attendance. We got it. Somewhere between 50 and 60 people showed up; we lost a few after the mandatory "concealed carry permits are required for guns in public facilities" announcement.



Instead, you want to focus on qualitative data such as participants' experience: what they felt, what they learned, and whether or not they'd come back for more.

- What do you want your program to achieve? It might be useful to you to have it written up as a statement of purpose: "We will do (x program) to accomplish (y strategic goal), and we will measure it using (z metric)."
- How will you evaluate the program? Some facilitators, like Oregon Humanities, will provide their own tools. If you need to create your own evaluation, the State Library's Library Development office has plenty of resources.
- What will happen to the evaluations at the end of the program? You, the facilitator, and the sponsoring organization all need access to the data. You also need to be able to explain to the subjects who will see the evaluations, what personal information will be tied to their answers, and how the evaluations will be stored or disposed of after the data has been analyzed. They will probably ask.
- When you are done collecting and analyzing your data, you can tie it back into your library's overarching narrative. Did you reach your goal? Would you offer the program again? If so, what would you do differently next time? Are there opportunities for related programs of interest to your community?

For *Guns and America*, Crook County Library used evaluations provided by Oregon Humanities, which are used at all Conversation Project programs and featured no CCL-specific questions. The evaluations that weren't torn up in dramatic fashion were eye-opening in the sense that they gave us a very clear picture of what the audience was thinking, but they didn't provide us with any library-specific constructive feedback that we could build upon.

What to Do if Everything Goes Pear-Shaped Anyway

So let's say it is the future, and you have followed our advice to a T. You have done everything that Crook County Library didn't do, took all the necessary precautions, and your program still ended in tears.

Don't murder us. You knew this job was dangerous when you took it.

You will probably feel like curling up in a ball and never engaging with the world again, but you and your library will have to get up the next day and face your patrons, your community, and yourselves. How do you start?

- Self-care, self-care, self-care. Take a long walk in the woods, take a road trip to Enchanted Forest, eat your body weight in pie, whatever. It's going to feel bad for a while. If you can, get some physical distance and take a friend with you.
- Be open with your staff about what happened. If it's safe to be blunt, be blunt. If there's a backlash, everybody will need to be ready for it.
- If you weren't physically present at the program, it is your responsibility as a co-worker and as a human being to listen to them with an open mind and heart. They need your support! If you do have constructive criticism to share, wait until the immediate aftermath has passed and you've had a chance to process all of the information.



- Have a response strategy in place, but don't feel compelled to respond to every comment from the public. Keep the discussion off your library's social media page, if you can—the goal is not to out-yell everybody else.

We coped by taking a mini road trip to Salem for pie, donuts, sushi, and roasted chicken. When we returned to Prineville, our co-workers were nothing but supportive. We spent hours discussing “what went wrong” with Crook County Library colleagues, Oregon Humanities staff, and each other. While the library did not respond to the flurry of Letters to the Editor in the local newspaper, Oregon Humanities did. These continued conversations—within the library and in the public more broadly—might also be seen as a kind of success: people were talking about the topic and about how best to talk about it. In any case, the immediate flames of the controversy eventually died down, and while the gunpowder-scented aftertaste of the program lingered in the library and the community past the end of Barratt's tenure as Assistant Director, Jane can attest to the fact that this, too, did pass.

Conclusion

JANE: So, Barratt, *how have we grown?* (cue tinkly Full House life lessons music)

BARRATT: Well, I learned a lot about how not to market a program! It also exposed me to a different side of rural America than I'd seen, which changed how I think about and discuss political issues in my personal life. And, perhaps most importantly, I rarely stress about my youth services programs now!

JANE: Hear, hear! My motto as a manager these days is: “is an atrocity occurring? Are people scared? No? Then, as Pete the Cat would say, ‘it's alllllll goooooood.’” The chaos threshold was definitely recalibrated after *Guns and America*.

BARRATT: How has this affected the Crook County Library in the long-term?

JANE: I got questions about it from other librarians for a long time, but the library's service population had pretty much forgotten all about *Guns and America* by the time I stepped into the Assistant Director role in early 2016. Since then, Crook County Library has successfully hosted multiple Oregon Humanities programs, including two of their statewide Talking About Dying and This Place programs. While not as immediately controversial as *Guns and America*, This Place turned out to be a great example of a program where people were able to bring different political perspectives into the library and discuss them in a way that was peaceable and productive. It was a real kumbayah moment.

BARRATT: One of the things that frustrates me about *Guns and America* is that it didn't have to be a bad program! I think that, under wildly different circumstances, it could have been a great topic.



JANE: I think it still could be a good topic, and I'd welcome that topic back into our space if the stars aligned. With the right presenter, the right set of marketing guidelines, the right ground rules, and maybe some prior discussion with some of the local service groups or the schools, I still have faith that Crook County Library could do right by this topic. Would you be willing to try again at Oregon City?

BARRATT: I think so! It's a different community with different hot-button issues, though. We recently hosted *Power, Privilege, and Racial Diversity in Oregon* through Oregon Humanities. Our community has really been struggling with racist incidents in the schools and KKK activity. The facilitator was amazing, our librarian was prepared, and everyone participated in a great conversation.

JANE: The best part in all of this? When a hiring manager or an up-and-coming library school student (or, in my dreams, a network exec who wants to make a show about sexy librarians) asks us about a time we screwed up and learned from it, we have a real corker of a story.

BARRATT: The only way to live with failure is to learn from it! If you do a political program at your library, something will probably go wrong. It might be a little thing. It might be half a dozen big things. It might be even worse than *Guns and America*. But it's not the end of the world. It will suck for a little while, and you will do better next time. 🌱

