

Travels with a Small-town Librarian: Reflections from Coast to Coast

Shelby Wilson-Powell¹

¹*Faculty of Information & Media Studies, Western University, swilsonp@uwo.ca*

To Cite:

Wilson-Powell, S. (2023). Travels with a small-town librarian: Reflections from coast to coast. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 4(1). 182-187. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder94>

Abstract

A rural public library acts like a community hub just like its urban counterpart. In many ways, both offer the same services to their regional clientele. However, the methods those services are delivered need to uniquely adapt to the small community it services. As a Library and Information Science (LIS) professional, the rural library requires patience and understanding in order to mesh together formal education and realistic practices. From adjusting collection development goals to managing unionized staff, your degree cannot prepare you for everything. The experiences gained from this hands-on learning is unforgettable and incredibly rewarding for a young professional.

Keywords: public librarian, rural library, small communities, young professionals

When I decided to apply for a Master in Library and Information Science (MLIS), I was working as a student assistant at my university's library. There I found that I enjoyed the structure of research assistance to the campus community. I was fortunate to work among supportive librarians who encouraged me to apply for my MLIS and helped me navigate course selections. In this environment, I was able to work my way up to higher assistant positions while I was in school, which allowed me to expand my knowledge in academic libraries through these new positions. My first-hand experiences and challenges at work aligned with the course offerings for academic libraries, so I focused my studies in public libraries where I had yet to work. Mostly, it was a backup plan to have knowledge in both streams, as I

had planned to pursue a career in academic or law libraries. Instead a small public library is where I launched my career and found my comfort in the profession.

The Rural Library Investment

Within a few weeks of finishing my classes, I moved to Nova Scotia for administrative work in a small public library. I was eager to start full-time work following two university degrees, and the idea of easing into public libraries without pressures from a public-facing position seemed comfortable and less anxious. After living in London, Ontario for six years I was also glad to return to a small town, despite this being a new area away from my friends and family. My studies focused on urban library systems, and it was an interesting learning transition into how rural library systems functioned. I was surprised by the way some rural libraries treat their professional staff. Unfortunately, this first position was not a good fit for me, but it did give me an opportunity to understand job postings and the emphasis of some interview questions. Rural systems generally have even more limited staff and resources than urban areas, and as I discovered, this puts a lot of pressure on the few staff who are available to maintain the system. The job I interviewed for was not the job I ended up working and after some meetings, it appeared that many of my tasks needed to start before I arrived, so naturally, others had to take on those roles. The few tasks that were left from my job description formed my new daily routines. These few tasks did not allow me to grow or learn more about public libraries, so it was time to move on. Between this position and my current role, it appears that rural libraries will either undermine qualifications and not utilize their staff to their full capabilities or they will see a degree as a valid excuse to merge multiple roles and tasks into one position, for one person to manage. As I found out, not everyone is ready to have those conversations.

Since I had moved to Nova Scotia for work, I was fortunate to find a new local job to support myself so I could leave the library. I was able to return to non-profit work with adults with intellectual disabilities, a job I had while getting my MLIS. In many ways, working among people while I applied to various library jobs furthered my interpersonal skills more than many may realize. While in graduate school, this support work also helped me engage with a group of future patrons I previously knew nothing about. Using

non-library experiences to showcase skills and new perspectives in libraries was very beneficial while job-seeking. Within a few months, I accepted a job in the central interior of British Columbia and was moving across the country, again. My work history at the university library where I had moved from a student assistant, research assistant, and finally to a library assistant supervising students had helped tremendously in landing my current position. However, my time as a support worker gave me a unique outlook for the active assignments that were part of my job interview process. In a series of video calls and emails, I had to show how I could move into a management position early in my career. However, this new position would once again be for a rural library system where many job responsibilities fall onto one role. Programming is not a large part of my job, but I was asked to show what new programs I could bring to this small community that I had never visited before. The activities I participated in everyday with my non-profit organization fuelled those ideas and it was seen as fresh and insightful. All of this showed my employer that I could get the job done and that it was worthwhile investing in areas that I lacked; mainly, working within a unionized environment. One aspect of my MLIS that I overlooked was this type of people management. Understanding the relationship between management and unionized staff was not an experience I had. There was no graduate course in following a collective agreement, so I had to face those challenges blindly and ask for help when I had no idea how to proceed. In a rural setting, where administrative duties fall onto few personnel, this component is crucial. Once again, I was fortunate to find an employer that trusted my initial experience and education, while also investing in me through professional development opportunities. Consider rural libraries as an investment for your career, especially if they are willing to invest in you.

Combining Professional Standards with Small-town Charm

For the last three years I have been the area librarian and branch manager for a small town of 1,900 plus the smaller, surrounding communities. As the area librarian in the South Cariboo, I am the only one with an MLIS. The staff are well trained to offer reference assistance and technology help, but connecting policy to practices for patron benefit and staff safety seem to be of little concern or interest. The collection was well maintained and the community fairly connected to the library, but I entered this area

with professional expectations and a naive notion that I would be easily accepted. Some did welcome me as a new face in the library, but most saw me as a threat who would disturb how the library functions in its own small way by bringing in academic and city rules.

The largest adjustment was privacy. As I found out, this branch was not concerned about privacy as the cliché small-town understanding that “everyone knows everyone” was taken literally. Explaining to staff why privacy and policies are important was an adjustment, and for some, a barrier to public service. My personal challenge was learning how to share this need without using my degree as a source of authority or belittling anyone who has never known how to do their job without breaking confidentiality. Additionally, some patrons were frustrated that they couldn’t access a neighbour’s account or ask for a staff’s schedule, but it was a worthwhile battle. Giving examples of the harm in sharing borrowing history with a parent of a teen exploring new subjects or the fine implications of a patron using a card they are not attached to was a great start to this conversation. Thankfully, I had support for these moves within my management team to further push this type of professional development for all staff in my branch.

While managing the staff side of the circulation desk was one aspect of this new position, navigating the inner workings of a team that is physically spread out continues to present new challenges. It has been difficult to gain respect and share my knowledge with colleagues as a young professional. So, when you work 100 kilometres away from other departments and managers, including your own supervisor, communication becomes your priority. I am still learning how to share my successes, along with my mistakes with those I work with. In working on sharing my experiences I hope to provide a learning space where questions, successes and failures can be shared. I own up to my mistakes and ask for help when needed, but after all this time my colleagues still view me as a young manager and doubt my abilities rather than benefit from my skills. As a young professional, I have to lean on those with more experience around me while also advocating for myself. After all, I am able to see how my formal education meets my life experiences to get the job done effectively. My time as a support worker continues to outshine any book I have read when it comes to making community connections, but

how do you get that across in an email or video call? What positive changes that have been made and can be seen by staff, patrons, and local organization members but that all go unnoticed by other management team members, especially if it cannot be shown as a number for a statistic? While that is the most challenging part of being a rural librarian, the most rewarding part of jumping into management so soon in my career has been the connections. Learning more about the people we serve through local businesses, organizations, and events is done without pressure and gives a similar feel to being involved with university campus groups; everyone wants to collaborate with new professionals in town who want to make this community the best for its people. I sit on a roundtable to understand the developmental needs of my youngest patrons and their parents who need our programming to access literary milestones, and I have been part of a literacy board to work with their programs and provide a collection that is useful to our young patrons and vulnerable adults who are learning. These are the connections that I can share by counting how many meetings I have attended, but I cannot show the brainstorming sessions in the grocery store when committee members run into each other or the support of sharing events on social media.

Joining community groups is only one aspect of providing a library that represents its users. As I was warned, this rural area is fairly conservative, but that does not represent everyone who lives in this town. I continue to diversify the collection and subsequently have lost some regular patrons along the way who do not agree with the current approach, but our library has continued to also welcome newcomers into our space. There is a delicate balance of providing rural patrons what they want and expect, while also showing them how to progress by exposing them to new subjects, authors, and films. The support from local organizations who are attempting to make the same changes allows an easier transition and truly resembles the charm of a small town. Looking at how libraries are cast in the news as of late, this pushback is not unique to rural libraries. The encouragement may be different and at times it may feel isolating as you try to keep the doors open for everyone to feel welcome in your small library, but that is part of the job as a rural librarian. Regardless of how well you parse through a job description, these small libraries rely on their librarians to complete the tasks that are typically done by multiple staff or departments in an urban system. Use the multitasking

SHORT TITLE

aspect that comes with these titles as a badge of honour as you provide the best library service for your population. It can be exhausting, and personally I am still learning how to juggle all the responsibilities in one role without undermining my abilities, but a rural public library is as rewarding as any other. I am grateful for this opportunity and the future it holds.