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Alicia Salaz
University of Washington

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My Mama Told Me, or How Two Generations of Library Workers Avoid Burnout

by **Alicia Salaz**
MLIS Candidate
Information School
University of Washington

When I was a little girl, my mom would take me to the Hollywood branch of Multnomah County Library to pick out as many picture books as my little arms could carry before stopping at McDonald's for a cone on the way home. She was hired as a part-time clerk at the library when I was ten, and soon began bringing home a graduated treasure trove of materials for me, much of which my friends' parents found completely objectionable. My fifth grade summer reading list included: Stephen King's novels *Carrie*, *Cujo*, and *Salem's Lot*, and a biography about a man who was detained for twenty years in a Mexican prison, the name of which currently escapes me.

Today, Mom's help is as indispensable as ever. She reminds me about where we keep the extra library users' guides, how to link a call to the reference desk, and what to do to troubleshoot a finicky self-check machine. She's a full-timer now, and has been working at the Hollywood library for over fourteen years. I've been working alongside her for nearly a year, and I mean that literally. Patrons will come to the desk, peer at us both a little sideways, arch an eyebrow, and then ask, "Are you two...?" And the answer of course, is yes we are. So here we are, me and my mom, hanging out together at the library. It's just like the old days, but with more Janet Evanovich.

Mom and I are both career library workers. I've been in school getting an MLIS while working for the library, and she plans to retire out of her current position. Though our paths have converged for the moment, my mother and I represent two very different kinds of worker. These two kinds of workers are motivated differently. They possess different aspirations. They require different treatment from managers and they bring different strengths to the table. And they get burned out by different things. The two types of workers are:



Alicia Salaz and her mother, Vicki Smith, in Prague.

- 1) The worker who knows they aren't going to be doing this job forever, and
- 2) The worker who knows they are going to be doing this job forever.

Worker number one corresponds to me, and worker number two corresponds to Mom. I have yet to find my career niche; she's definitely found hers. If (or when) we experience burnout, it will be for completely different reasons. Since this isn't my "forever" job, I might get tired or frustrated with the work tasks, or experience stress over the uncertainty of my working future. I might be extending myself in other ways outside of the job, which competes for my work-time energy, or I might lack a sense of integral belonging or importance in the workplace. Mom, on the other hand, might at times feel under-rewarded for her long-term investment in her organization, or simply bored of the scenery.

Libraries are full of these kinds of workers—including part-timers, and students who will eventually move on, as well as those support staff and professionals who, for a variety of reasons, will remain indefinitely. Everyone knows that libraries stand on the shoulders of their staff members, and it follows that keep-



ing those shoulders fit and happy is in the interest of administrators and employees alike. The question is: in terms of keeping it fresh, avoiding stress and boredom, and especially maintaining motivation, which of us has it easier—her or me? Type one or type two?

Much like the number of library records solicited under the Patriot Act, the world may never know. What's important is that she and I have explored ways to stay motivated at work, rather than succumbing to "the burn."

Mom, whom I shall hereforth refer to as "Vicki," her real name, says that the demands of her job have increased over the last fourteen years. The drastically increased usage and materials circulation that Multnomah County has experienced since the early 1990s is a testament to the library's success. But for Vicki, this sometimes means "doing the same thing over and over again as fast as possible in an effort to stay caught up." Her strategy for coping? "I take a few days off about every three or four months,"

she told me. "I think having the vacation time to use really helps avoid burnout because I can regularly take a few days to just relax, do nothing and regroup."

The benefits of periodic R&R are well-documented. Public libraries, commonly residing in the public sector of the work world, tend to offer decent vacation and holiday benefits to employees. Workers should be sure to take advantage of these benefits.

Time off isn't the only option for a change of pace, however. Vicki regularly involves herself in a variety of committees and teams at work, all of which provide opportunities for her to exercise different skill sets as well as offering her a break from the normal routine. During her tenure at Multnomah County, she has worked multiple tours of duty for groups like the Summer Reading Committee, Circulation Committee, and Budget Committee. Her role in these groups has ranged from simple ("I basically just took notes and reported back to the branch") to noteworthy ("I actually got to write a piece of circulation policy from scratch!"). These achievements, undoubtedly, were recognized by her peers and superiors, another factor which Vicki says influences her motivation at work. "I get a lot of positive comments and good feedback from my supervisors, coworkers, and the public, too." She says. "It really helps me keep going."

My own strategies for avoiding burnout at work are similar in many respects. I too, have taken advantage of opportunities to participate on committees and teams at Multnomah County. My current at-work extracurriculars include participation in our Circulation Training and Intellectual Freedom committees. In contributing to these committees, I am able to practice Web content maintenance and training of other staff. Since I only work part-time for the library, these activities aren't necessary for diversifying my routine. Instead, I see them as an opportunity to improve my skills



Vicki prepares to relax in Prague.



and experience. Hopefully, I'll be able to apply the experience I gain in some future endeavor. In addition, this work brings relevance and immediacy to my job, and makes it something that I want to invest energy into. As far as periodically taking time off from work goes, I'm as well-versed in the practice as anybody. The difference is, where Vicki prefers R&R, I prefer activity. This year, I've taken time off work to finish school, to do an archiving internship at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, to learn how to sky dive, visit Cuba, and play disc golf. A healthy portfolio of non-work activities that I enjoy helps me to stay happy, energized and optimistic in general, which in turn has a positive effect on my work attitude.

Earlier this year, Vicki and I had an opportunity to combine work-related development with vacation time in a two-week tour of libraries in the Czech Republic, hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Charles University in Prague. What we discovered there was fascinating: a country full of vibrant, well-preserved and extensive library systems and collections, growing more visible and more accessible by the day. We visited public,

academic, private, special, and medical libraries, including a very special stop at the Libri Prohibiti, or banned books library, which served as a solemn reminder of the recent decades of oppressive Soviet control over Czechoslovakia and of the extensive censorship of materials and ideas during that time.

When I was speaking with my mother for the purposes of this article, I first asked her point-blank what motivates her at work. Her immediate and unhesitating response reminded me of our time in the Czech Republic. She said, "I believe in the value of libraries. I feel that I'm performing a public service—a valuable service."

The recognition of the value of your work is one of the most important ways to keep from burning out. Luckily for all of us, there is something inherently, fundamentally valuable about the services that all libraries provide. I think that anyone who works in a library should be able to draw on this as a source of motivation on a hard day—and as a source of pride on a good day. No matter what your role or function, you are a kind of angel for everybody out there who came to your library to get some information. Remember that. 🌿



Alicia drinking to our health in Prague.

