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Earning a Tarnished Tiara

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There is nothing like moving to a new city and starting a new job to remind you of how to learn at an accelerated pace. You'll remember what that's like if you think back to when you were learning how to walk or picking up language for the first time. Remember that? This is what I have been doing, off and on, since August of 2009, when I bade farewell to my buddies in Eugene and found myself on the mean streets of ... Oregon City. Oh, and Portland.

Our youngest son had just graduated from high school and it was time for me to join my husband in Portland; he had been working there during the week and commuting to Eugene on weekends for six years. I got the job as the Library Director at Oregon City Public Library (OCPL) and, like the Beverly Hillbillies, we sold the house, loaded up the truck and moved to downtown Portland. Why? Because we were empty nesters and we could. And, like many people in this metropolitan area, I work in one place—Oregon City—and live in another—Portland. This doubled the adventure and challenges of my move north. The lights! The bridges! The traffic! The traffic! The traffic! Always the traffic!

As librarians, we are always talking up that “lifelong learning” thing, right? I'm so on board with that. During the first months of my new job/home undertaking, I could feel the neurons mapping new territory in my brain. All this learning must be a great recipe for preventing Alzheimer's, I thought. The thing about uninterrupted, accelerated learning is that it is exhausting! I've not been this tired since I had two toddlers, and let's face it, that was some years ago.

In order to cope, I ensured that red wine was always available, strictly for medicinal purposes, of course. To survive the commute, I took up listening to audio books, the fluffier the better. And for purposes of rejuvenation and rest of the new brain cells, I quickly became addicted to iPhone mahjongg and Word Warp. I threw in a weekly yoga class and long walks to help stave off the stress.

At work, I was finally in the position which I had long believed suited me: Library Director. However, I was hardly the queen of the castle of my imagination. OCPL was housed in a leased, concrete block building in a shopping mall and was in need of renovation. The Library had no windows except for the glass entryway. It was dim, crowded, and had been without a professional director for eight years. My job was to build a new library. But first, I had to learn everyone's name, wrap my head around the new and strange city/county/district funding/governing arrangement, and figure out my new community/service area/world. My tiara was sweaty and tarnished within the first two days and I was prepared to give it away for the price of a pedicure.

And then it got worse: I learned we would have to move the library. Yikes! What's a library director to do?

This is when I added ‘patience’ to my vocabulary and my attitude; and a good thing too, because really, the fun was just beginning.

Here's some background on my new work environs. LINCC (Library Information Network of Clackamas County) is a relatively new county service district covering almost the entirety of Clackamas County. FY 2009 marked the first distribution of funds. Prior to the formal District, the libraries in Clackamas County had worked together for years, had established service areas for each library, and had centralized some functions in addition to other co-operative activities, but many of the city or county-run libraries were on the brink of clo-



sure due to funding problems. Supporters organized, a district was passed, and voila! several libraries were invigorated with a substantial and stable annual shot of funding. The goal of the district was to fund the libraries to be able to achieve threshold levels of the OLA Public Library Standards. The Standards include having a degreed professional in the position of Library Director/Manager; hence, the desire for Oregon City to replace its previous organizational structure with an in-house Library Director; hence, my new and wonderful job.

There are 13 libraries in LINCC. Two of them are County libraries, while the remaining are City libraries. Each is governed by its corresponding governing entity, but because of the new funding model with the District, we also enjoyed the oversight of the County, primarily in the form of a Library District Advisory Committee.

Oregon City's library had suffered from under-funding for years and was seriously close to closing prior to the passage of the District. It had also been trying to build a new library for years, but the funding was never robust enough to act on those efforts. The District saved OCPL and now that its survival was ensured and I was hired, it was time to consider that new library again. OCPL had moved out of its Carnegie Library in 1995 to leased space. The landlord of the leased space was eager to redevelop his shopping mall and felt confident that—now that I was on board—he could ask us to move in order to get on with his project. And so it was that within four months of my start date, I learned that we needed to be moved by June 1. No longer was I looking for a site; now I was looking for a place to move. We had to make a critical decision. Would we 1) move into another leased space and spend money getting that all fixed up as a library, 2) move into a city-owned facility and get to save on rent for awhile, or 3) buy an existing building and remodel it? The search for a site suddenly intensified; during this time we started talking to the school district about the possibility of purchasing a former school from them. These talks were progressing well and therefore we decided to temporarily move *back* into the Carnegie Library (now called the Carnegie Center), and work towards the purchase of the school building.

This is how I found myself coordinating the move of over 120,000 items to three locations: donated space at a school, donated space at our Friends bookstore, and our new temporary home, a 6,000-square-foot building, the former Carnegie Library (here we go again). We reopened the Carnegie Center as a library on June 21, 2010, ironically 97 years to the day that it first opened as a library. We continued investigating the school property as a future site; unfortunately, after due diligence was completed six months later, we decided that this was not going to work out as a remodel. We walked away from the deal and started over.

I must mention that since I've been in Oregon City, the following events occurred:

- The City Manager who hired me left within my first eight months and I had to get used to a new City Manager while I was still getting used to the City Manager/Council form of governing.
- A project called "The Rivers" became a focal point of voter disagreement between the "no growth" and "jobs" people. I was still getting used to attending City Commission meetings (part of my role as a department head), and the behavior that took place at these meetings still takes my breath away.



- A commissioner was recalled, quite specifically for his work against “The Rivers” development. While he probably was not single-handedly responsible for its demise, by then it did not matter.
- Our County Network manager retired and was not replaced for several months.
- One of our Library Managers retired and we restructured the Library organization.

One of the main themes is clearly a shifting cast of characters. Another theme has been juggling people and groups of people. You could call this managing, but on many days it is not clear who is the manager and who is the managee. There is staff. I’m lucky, they’re fabulous. But after having no money for years, morale was a bit of an issue. There is the Library Board. I’ve never dealt with one of those before. Again I’m lucky, mine is also fabulous. But, wow, what do you do with an advisory group who wanted that new building years ago and would really like to feel like they are “doing something”? There are the Friends of the Library. More luck, more fabulousness. But, wow, they have a much larger bookstore than most Friends I know. So, that’s interesting. And then there is the Foundation. I’m lucky, they’re amazing, but aren’t you guys some of the same people in the other groups?

As I write this, I have been library director for 2 ½ years, the Library has been located in the Carnegie Center for over 1 ½ years, and I feel like I am finally getting to really know people here Oregon City. It takes time. At least, for me it takes time. And I had to give myself permission to take the time, to do it my way, and remember they hired me because I’m me, so trusting myself is ok. Not that I’m the end all, just that people will let me know when it’s not ok; in the meantime, continue doing what works.

Another thing I have I learned: this is a marathon, not a sprint. At the end of the day, can I say yes to the question, “Was progress made today?” If so, then it was a good day. I go home, rejuvenate, and return to continue the marathon.

Another thing I’ve learned is that while you keep your eyes on the prize, you can’t forget about the details. I was hired to pay attention to the big picture. I must specialize in the “out of library” stuff, but not paying attention to the in-house stuff could be my demise. Besides, it’s what got me into libraries in the first place. And, in a small library like mine, everyone does a little bit of everything. So, in addition to trying to get that new building built, I stay connected to all aspects of the library. It’s a necessity and a joy.

And, most of all, I have had the best time finding support and learning from my department head colleagues and city manager, my LINCC colleagues, my staff, my library colleagues outside Clackamas County (thank you OLA, PLD, Libs-OR, State Library, etc.), community members and volunteers, Library Board, Friends, Foundation, Clackamas Community College, Oregon City School District and all of the people who have agreed to collaborate with me and the Library. It’s been FUN!

As you can tell, the challenges have been many. The opportunities, however, are endless. I love my job and I feel that it is a perfect fit for me. I go to work each day optimistic and knowing that I matter to my community. Can it really get any better than that?

You know what? I think I’ll keep that tarnished tiara. For me, it’s just right! 🌸

