

My Life in Teen Services: Then and Now

by **April Witteveen**
Community Librarian,
Deschutes Public Library
aprilw@deschuteslibrary.org



APRIL WITTEVEEN is a Community Librarian at the downtown Bend location of Deschutes Public Library. A native Michigander, you'll catch her Midwestern accent in passionate conversation. April is an explorer, a maker, a mother, and a retired roller derby skater. She is also a freelance writer for *Library Journal* and *School Library Journal*, where she reports on trends and best practices in the greater library field.

Fourteen years into my career as a teen services librarian, I thought it would be interesting to reflect on my early years as a fresh-faced librarian and compare those experiences to where I am now, mid-career. I can both laugh a bit at my early naiveté, and feel concerned that I've grown too old to connect with my intended audience. Regardless, my dedication to serving the teens in my community has only grown stronger as I move further into my second decade of being "that librarian who came to my school and talked about books!"

School Visits

Then: I was blindsided by the fact that I'd be required to speak to large crowds of teen-aged students. I was not prepared for public speaking in library school! I had never heard of booktalking and certainly didn't know what to do when forty sixth-graders were busy chatting with their classmates while I was trying my best to impart Very Valuable Library Information.

Now: I don't want to toot my own horn (too loudly), but I'm an old pro. Forty sixth-graders? Give me 150! I know all your school's quieting techniques and besides, I'm such a raging book nerd up there on stage, it's hard to look away. I've also learned classroom instruction and management skills, and as a result, my confidence as a de facto teacher has helped me form valuable relationships and a strong rapport with local educators.

Programs

Then: It may be hard to believe, but Bend really was a lot smaller when I first moved here. There weren't quite as many recreational options for teens, personal technology was still a few years off, and my library had been putting a very concerted, strategic effort into reaching teens. Looking back, I really had it made, averaging 15+ teens per program. I was also a lot younger and had no problem with after-hours lock-ins with a hundred-plus teens ... or with really committing to multiple hours of Dance Dance Revolution.



Now: I work hard to keep the cynicism at bay. I have weathered changes in both my work schedule and the schedules of area schools that have severely impacted what I can offer as far as programming. I have a young family and my work-life balance needs more attention than in my early years. Our local teens have a multitude of options for both recreational and educational opportunities; I don't want to duplicate offerings too much in what still feels like a small town, and our older students are scheduled within an inch of their lives. My library building hasn't magically moved closer to any middle or high schools, so the barrier of transportation to my events still exists. We've also seen a loss in dedicated teen-serving librarians in my system over the past 10 years which has impacted our amount of programming for this age group. Despite these obstacles and limitations, every time a college student says hi to me in the grocery store during winter break and shares a library memory, I know I've made an impact.

Staying on Trend

Then: I was 27. I was naturally closer to the age of the customers I serve, and it was easier to know "what kids these days" were up to.

Now: I'm 40. Enough said on that topic ...



April shares book love with a large middle school audience at Pilot Butte Middle School in Bend.



While I believe that library services for teens don't need to be completely trend-based, it does help to know a little about where teens are online, what pop culture interests are strong in a given year, and what your teen community is generally into. Now, I just claim my age and ask them to explain things to me. My teen library council is really great at letting me know when I'm trying too hard!

Summer Reading

Then: IT'S RAINING BOOKS AND PRIZES, OMG!!! Big events, big spending, always tweaking our approach. Every year felt like a challenge to see what would bring in more students to the library.

Now: Our teen summer reading participation statistics have found a median over the past decade, and none of the adjustments to the program's format or prizes have resulted in a significant jump in our numbers, or, to be fair, dropped us too far down (except for the one year we tanked doing a strictly online program ... interesting.) I still love to give away books, and I enjoy putting together a slate of summer programs that have been better serving our tween community, hopefully building up a stronger teen presence in the following years. However, I know we're not reaching out much beyond our standard summer library users; the number of students I speak to during promotional visits at schools leading up to summer break in no way matches the actual statistics I record. I'm ready for a SRP revolution, who's with me?

Readers Advisory

Then: Read all the teen books! Recommends *The Hunger Games* to high school students only; waits in line at the bookstore for the midnight release of the next book in the *Twilight Saga*.

Now: Read all the teen books! No real change here, I still find reading predominantly in our teen collection to be thoroughly enjoyable. I love to see real live grownups discover the teen collection, and I will never shame a new adult from keeping up with their favorite teen series. I've served on the Printz Committee and have honed my critical reading mind, especially in light of #weneeddiversebooks. Now I'm looking for those titles that serve up literary appeal as well as relatable teen content—but you'll never take those midnight release *Twilight* feelings away from me!

Professional Development

Then: Conferences are big and overwhelming. I'm exhausted every day. I'm sad I can't do/see/hear everything I starred in my (print, of course) program.

Now: Webinar archives will always be there when I have a spare hour. Conferences are special events where my energy should be carefully parsed out with thoughtful planning and attention to what matters most to me and my library in a given year. Networking has paid off and I have library friends from around the country to share a meal with, to vent with, and to scheme with. I've served on multiple committees and offer my skills and knowledge back to the profession. My advice as a conference veteran? It's OK to skip a session and take



a nap. Always be considerate on the exhibit floor. Take a risk and say hi to someone new, or someone you consider a “library celebrity.” We’re all just a bunch of nerds, working together for our communities.

In conclusion, serving the ever-shifting target that is a teen audience has given me more professional joy and accomplishment than I could have thought possible when I walked off the graduation stage with my MLS. This isn’t a job for every librarian, and those of us who find our calling with teens form a special community. I’m thankful for the progressive work of the Young Adult Library Association (YALSA,) including their release of *The Future of Library Services for and With Teens: a Call to Action* (<https://tinyurl.com/n4hveuv>) and the significant work done on *Teen Services Competencies for Library Staff*, (<https://tinyurl.com/yacnd3ga>) both of which offer new paradigms and approaches that should inform our field moving forward. As youth services in the libraries of Oregon continue the good work of helping our middle and high school-aged students become career, college, and adulthood-ready, give a special high-five to your local teen services librarian! 🙌

