



Contributing Editor
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Britta is currently reading *Salvage* by Alexandra Duncan.

Tales from the Front focuses on best practices and innovative ideas from libraries nationwide.

I Work at a Public Library

Customer service can be one of the most challenging aspects of the job for frontline staff, but it is arguably the most important part of a patron's library experience. Whether someone continues to use the library depends greatly on the type of service he or she receives from the staff. I've seen patrons literally cut up their library cards and demand to be deleted from the library database after being given poor service. I've also seen patrons whose conversations with library staff are the only interaction they have with other human beings, and they depend on the library to remind them that they're not alone. Even those patrons who challenge us deserve the best service we can give, and those are the experiences that often give us the best stories. Gina Sheridan, a librarian at the St. Louis County (Mo.) Public Library (SLCPL), has curated (and categorized into classes) a collection of strange, humorous, and heartwarming public library patron interactions in her new book, *I Work at a Public Library: A Collection of Crazy Stories from the Stacks*.¹

After becoming a public librarian in Fresno (Calif.), Sheridan found that her friends enjoyed hearing stories about what was going on at work. After having an encounter in 2010 with a patron who dubbed herself "Cuckoo," she started writing down her own experiences with patrons on a Tumblr blog (<http://iworkatapubliclibrary.com>) in order to keep track of her interactions with her more memorable patrons.² The blog started to take off and other library staff from across the country began submitting their own stories and experiences. Not only did the blog inspire the book, but it also won the *Riverfront Times*' Best Blog St. Louis 2014 award.³

Both the blog and the book are kept as anonymous and as neutral in tone as possible. However, the stories require no spin in order to entertain the reader. For example, who of us has not had to deal with unrealistic expectations from patrons?

Library, Margaritas

A sweaty patron walked up to the desk on a very hot day.

Patron: Where is the margarita machine?

Me: [*chuckles*]: That's funny; it is hot out there.

Patron: [*Stares at me with a straight face.*]

Me: Oh, did you think we had margaritas? Did someone say we had margaritas?!

Patron: [*Keeps staring.*]

Me: I'm sorry. We don't serve margaritas at the library.

Patron: [*Turns around and walks away.*]⁴

Not only do patrons occasionally come into the library looking for something we just can't provide, but it can also be difficult interpreting what they tell us they want. All of us, whether professionals or paraprofessionals, have undoubtedly had to use our reference skills to determine whether or not a patron is asking for the item they've envisioned.

Ocean, The

Patron: Would you please order me a movie called *The Ocean*?

Me: Sure! Is that the exact title?

Patron: Yes . . . well, maybe.

Me: Is it a movie about oceans?

Patron: I'm not sure.

Me: Can you describe it?

Patron: No, a friend just recommended it.

Me: Do you think you are referring to the marine animal documentary called *Oceans*?

Patron: No, I'm sure it's a real movie, not a nature movie. My friend said there were three parts.

Me: It wouldn't happen to be *Ocean's Eleven*, would it?

Patron: That's it!⁵

Even when our experiences seem more like a storyline from *Parks and Recreation* than actual occurrences in a public library environment, there are those interactions with patrons that let you know that you're appreciated, and that the work you do is important. Sheridan devotes an entire chapter to them at the end of her book, appropriately titled "809.9339: Volumes of Gratitude."

Thanks, Giving

Today around noon, a man I didn't recognize came into the library with several huge platters of food from a local restaurant.

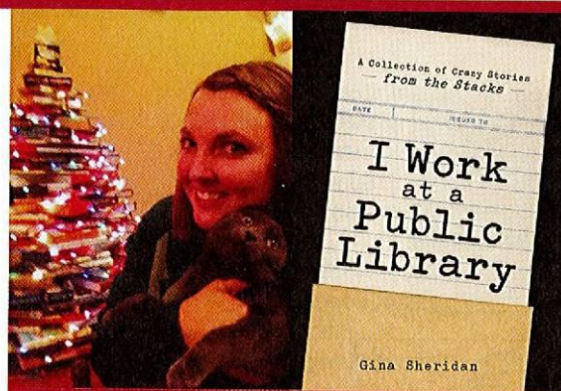
Man: I thought I'd cater your staff's lunch today! [*Places platters on the counter.*] You all helped me apply for a job last year when I was at my lowest. Well, I got the job and never forgot it. I wanted to do something for you.

Me: [*Thanking him with tears in my eyes, and then he quickly leaves.*]⁶

Sheridan inspired me to write down some of my own stories from the past nine years as a public librarian. I don't want to forget the feeling I had when a previously grumbly and very intimidating gentleman thanked me profusely for providing him with the books he needed to start his own computer repair business. And now that I can look back on it with humor, I definitely want to remember all the details I can about the time a patron lodged a formal complaint about me with my supervisor because I was not fluent in French. Remembering how I've dealt with patrons in different situations in the past helps with developing more successful customer service strategies, for use in future interactions.

Keeping track of the interactions we have with library patrons is important. Certainly, it's nice to have qualitative information for when you need to make a point to a grant committee or your board of trustees. Also, we can share these experiences with future librarians and library workers to help them have a more realistic idea of what it's like in the field and the type of customer service skills they'll be expected to develop.

More importantly, stories like this remind us why we do what we do, show the rest of the world just how important libraries are, and prove that the stereotype of library workers sitting around all day, stamping books or playing with puppets, is completely untrue. **PL**



Librarian Gina Sheridan (left) and the cover of her new book, *I Work at a Public Library*.

(Photo courtesy of the author.)

References

1. Gina Sheridan, *I Work at a Public Library: A Collection of Crazy Stories from the Stacks* (Fairfield, Ohio: Adams Media, 2014).
2. Sheridan, interview with the author, Oct. 29, 2014.
3. *Riverfront Times*, "Best Blog St. Louis 2014: I Work at a Public Library," Sept. 2014, accessed Nov. 7, 2014, www.riverfronttimes.com/bestof/2014/award/best-blog-2448689.
4. Sheridan, *I Work at a Public Library*, 57.
5. *I Work at a Public Library* blog, "Ocean, The," Feb. 20, 2014, accessed Nov. 7, 2014, <http://iiworkatapubliclibrary.com/post/77278675779/ocean-the>.
6. Sheridan, *I Work at a Public Library*, 143.



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