

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Christi Buker

Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Library Association, 2016-

Stephanie Campbell

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**Congratulations and welcome to the Pennsylvania Library Association.
What drew you to PaLA?**

Thanks for the warm welcome - it is one of the strengths of all the Pennsylvania librarians that I have met so far! When I came across the opportunity at Pennsylvania Library Association, I knew that my personal values and passion for education and life-long learning would mirror the mission of libraries and librarians. During the interview process, it was clear that it would be a fantastic group of people to work with – and who wouldn't want to help libraries?!

What are the similarities and/or differences between your last position, as executive director with the Central PA Chapter of Independent Electrical Contractors (IEC), and this one?

Both organizations are led by a volunteer board of directors who also have other full-time jobs. These individuals come from the membership and therefore have a passion for the mission and are dedicated to its achievement. This passion is an aspect I truly enjoy. At the same time, I am sensitive to the workload that we ask volunteers to handle while simultaneously having another job that actually pays the bills. It is an important awareness for me and our small, but dedicated staff - that we will all work together.

Working with small and medium size businesses is very similar to working with libraries. Typically, smaller entities might not have a dedicated human resources or technology professional. Instead, the library director might have to wear multiple hats and have responsibilities that they might not have any specific training to handle. This is where the value of membership in an association helps provide connections to others who can share best practices, tips and advice, and referrals to those who might be more experienced.

I was never an electrician, and I'm not a librarian. In both my past position and in this one, I dedicate myself to learning the strengths and challenges of those that I serve. I am reading the library code, and will listen intently to understand the challenges and question YOU as the experts to learn the nuances of the field. My job in both organizations means that I learn about the strengths of our members and institutions and be the referral source or connecting hub for library to library, and peer-to-peer relationship building.

In what other ways has your background prepared you for your new role?

There are the obvious answers here. I was an executive director of a successful, non-profit trade association for ten years. In that role, I worked with members that were small and medium-size business owners. The primary program was to train individuals to become electricians through a federal and state registered apprenticeship program over the course of four years. The complexity of budgeting, marketing, recruiting, and advocacy for the program are direct skills that translate to most association management positions.

The less obvious background that has prepared me centers around my experiences in 4-H, a youth development program, and my involvement in international youth exchange programs. Through the 4-H Toastmaster project, I developed public speaking skills from the age of 12. Many people dread speaking in public more than dying, and yet speaking is such a vital component in so many careers. I look forward to helping libraries not only with my voice, but also helping librarians strengthen their own voices to advocate for success.

At the age of 16, I spent a month in Japan living with a host family that had a daughter my same age as part of an international youth exchange program. I was fortunate to return to Japan during my college years, and spend another 14 months living with the same family and working as the 4-H Intern for the same U-trek International Exchange Program. Those experiences gave me significant insight into the value of listening and learning from others, embracing an open-heart, and open-mind, and recognizing that face-to-face, personal interactions are the foundation for strong and lasting relationships. After my time in Japan, I have a keen belief that relationships – even with those whose views are different from our own – are essential to success.

Have you been surprised by anything so far in learning about Pennsylvania libraries and how they operate?

I have to say that librarians do an outstanding job of stretching every dollar they receive. The operational budgets for libraries of all types do not have a lot of cushion or wiggle-room. Yet, through collaborative efforts, and creative fundraising, libraries are providing an impressive array of services and resources!

I am in awe of the strong dedication of professional librarians. These are individuals who have earned master's degrees in their field with a wide-range of specialized skills from archiving and preservation to digital resources and emerging technology. It is clear from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that they have not chosen to be librarians for the compensation, but rather that they choose to make a difference in their communities by providing resources and invaluable assistance to their patrons.

Personally, I always want to do work that is meaningful and helps people through all types of educational experiences. Libraries provide such great opportunities, well beyond books, from hands-on learning programs, early literacy workshops, career-enhancing online course access and seminars, financial education for multiple age brackets, and improving health through reading inspiring stories, and providing life balance through pleasure reading. Libraries help everyone – and I am honored to have the opportunity to be a part of this great organization!

From a workforce perspective, the specialization of librarians is fascinating. From teaching librarians to researchers to technology experts, it is quite a spectrum of skills. I also have to say that I'm surprised by the number of part-time librarians. I recognize that there are many reasons for this, but it certainly creates a unique workforce composition.

I am pleasantly surprised at how passionate librarians are about intellectual freedom. It is not something that first came to my mind. Now it just raises the respect that I have for libraries as they have become ardent defenders of the freedom to read and research topics from all perspectives.

What are your goals for the organization?

First, I have to say that the Pennsylvania Library Association has a long history of success from its founding in 1901. The fact that it is still an active, volunteer-led organization, is a testament to the vibrancy and passion of its members and mission. So, with that history in mind, my goals could be simply stated by quoting the 4-H motto – “to make the best, better”.

Members of the Pennsylvania Library Association already believe that it is one of the best entities in the country for advancing libraries and librarians. I want to make sure that we continue to advance that mission, and improve it by increasing our membership. Membership is not a mere business transaction where you pay dues and you get a specific package of services and products. Yes, membership does have specific benefits, but it is also an investment in yourself and your profession. It has both short-term returns in items such as discounts at the conference, but there are long-term rewards through the development of skills that lead to career advancement, connections that often generate life-long friendships, and recognition of individual and institutional achievements to cite a few examples. Membership matters in so many ways! This will be a central focus for us moving forward.

Increasing awareness of the great work that librarians are doing is also a priority. One of the first things that I have asked is that we focus on saying “Pennsylvania Library Association” versus using our acronym. Yes, it is easier to use the acronym sometimes, but I believe that the public at-large needs to hear us talk about the library in order to recognize all that happens in the library. This is a little thing, but over time, it can have a significant impact.

The great thing about the association is that it isn't about what one person wants. The platform – from programs to committees to investments - is created by a team of passionate volunteers who are working to build

strong libraries and strong professionals. In the end, stronger communities and libraries are not built by one person, but by the collective efforts of highly motivated and talented librarians.