***Can’t Shelve This* Episode 3**

**“The Library’s Got Rizz” with Nichole Folkman**

Janette: Hey there. Welcome back to Can’t Shelve This, the podcast where we hammer home the importance of school libraries. I'm Janette Derucki and I'm joined by my co-host, Leah Gregory.

Leah: Hi, everyone.

Janette: And our fearless leader and producer, Ola Gronski.

Ola: Hi, thanks Janette.

Janette: How are you both doing since the last time we were all together?

Leah: I feel like I've been a train wreck since the last time we were all together.

Ola: The silence said it all. I feel like we're recovering from big conference season.

Leah: That whole busy lead up. I think fall is the busiest time. And so now I have, I'm less busy, but I feel like I have no focus or direction also. So, it's been a week for me.

Ola: Also, it's the time of the year where you can be like, we'll circle back after the holidays and just push everything off to January 2nd.

Janette: I totally agree. It’s nice we're coming out of the big conference season in Illinois and we had a lot of, like a lot of fun and we're able to see a ton of people, which is always really great. I got to present with Leah quite a bit. I was really fortunate and my favorite thing I want to share with you, Leah, from the feedback from people at our sessions were, I had a lot of people ask like what our method is for preparing for our presentations.

Leah: Do we have one?

Janette: Literally, like their reaction when I was like, there isn't one. They were like, how do you decide who's going to say what? And I just kind of said, we don't. So I think that that was a big surprise. And I don't know, maybe people out there will also be surprised by that.

Leah: Well, I'm glad that they're surprised by that because it would be really bad if they go, well, that's obvious.

Janette: I'm like, it's all vibes. We don't, we don't plan. We don't split it up. It's just whatever happens in the moment, it's a new and unique experience every time, so.

Ola: That’s a guarantee. That's the sell.

Leah: Yes.

Ola: You never know what you're going to get.

Leah: Even though we’ve presented some of those several times, it's always a little bit different. And I had somebody come up to me after our presentation and say, You know, you and Janette are just like sisters. And then she goes, what would your life be like if you had never met her? And I'm like, well don't give me that bad juju.

Janette: We're not thinking about that.

Leah: Yeah.

Janette: Let’s not think about that.

Leah: Yeah.

Janette: Those are not happy times.

Leah: But we did, so it's all good.

Janette: So okay, so Ola was talking a little bit about like winter, right? Like, so now it's rolling into the next busy season is the holidays, right? So do either of you have any big plans coming up? Anything?

Ola: Paid time off.

Janette: Yeah.

Leah: Yes. My daughter is coming home for a long stretch and she's bringing her boyfriend. He almost never gets to come with her because he always has to work. I'm excited about that. But I have to tell you the really dorky thing I'm very excited about. My new hobby. I got an iPad with an Apple pencil.

Janette: Fun. I have one. I love it.

Leah: So I'm obsessed with, like, the paint by numbers or color by numbers.

Ola: I love the paint by numbers.

Leah: And I have all these really cute Christmas pictures, but I'm like, I'm not ready to start them because I'm kind of like, you have to have Thanksgiving first before you can start Christmas.

Ola: I suppose.

Leah: Are you like, when do you put your Christmas stuff up?

Ola: I try to do day after Thanksgiving.

Leah: I do too.

Janette: So I wait. Maybe it's because my youngest daughter was born in December, so like my whole adult life has been well, at least since she was born, trying to be like birthday first, then Christmas. And now my kids tell me that didn't really matter, that I was like just stealing their holiday joy. But you know, it's whatever.

But I really, really tried because I was like, I have a birthday around Thanksgiving-ish time. And I was always very aware of the fact that I would get Christmas-themed gifts for my birthday. And I was like, if my birthday was in June, you would not be giving me this.

Ola: It’s a little bit of a bummer.

Leah: Yeah.

Janette: So I guess I'm hypersensitive to that. So sorry. But anyway, I am. I was like, I'm not a holiday, like a Hallmark holiday movie watcher. Do you guys partake?

Leah: No.

Janette: No.

Ola: I have friends who go so far as to, like, download the app and mark down every single one they watch. I love, I think the hallmarks are a little bit hard for me to stomach sometimes unless there's like an actress or actor I love, I will go out of my way to watch them. But I love those horrible, cheesy Netflix ones that have come out in the past few years. Those I will watch. Yes.

Janette: Yeah, absolutely. The thing that always gets me is that I'm not prepared for is that the Hallmark Christmas movies start in like October. So like they are in full swing right now, like.

Leah: Yeah, I'm not ready. I am. I have to get past Thanksgiving, so.

Janette: I'm like you, Ola. Like, I have a friend who she literally will check them off on her calendar like, this is going to be coming out on this day. And then she reviews them all online, like she rates them in Christmas trees. It's fantastic.

Ola: I love that for them.

Janette: Then I only have to watch the ones that are like four trees or five, if I watch them at all.

Ola: You're going to have to share that list. I would love to look at that.

Leah: I love reading Christmas novels though, like Christmas Romance.

Janette: So I just recently read Ally Carter's new Christmas Romance. Leah, you gave me the perfect segue way. Thank you so much.

Ola: Love Ally Carter.

Leah: I’ll keep that up for you.

Janette: I do too. Like, okay, so it's called The Most Wonderful Crime of the Year. And it is like this cute little cozy mystery set in the English countryside. It's these two rival mystery writers that work for the same publisher, and they get invited to the estate of, like, their mystery writing idol, and then someone goes missing and they have to solve it.

Ola: It’s a Hallmark movie in a book.

Leah: A book, it is. It sounds like it.

Janette: It’s kind of like the best of, it's like a rom com, it's a cozy mystery, but it's also an enemies to lovers romance. So like I love it.

Ola: One of my favorites.

Janette: Plus, Ally Carter. Just always great writing. Very, very funny.

Leah: I haven't read that one yet, but it is on my TBR pile. But I do have a favorite holiday novel that I reread, I used to reread it every year. I haven't read it again in a few years. It's called Nobody's Fool by Richard Russo. Have you ever read it? Or there is a movie.

Janette: I haven’t read that. I haven't seen it either.

Leah: I love it because it reminds me of the little town that I grew up in. And it's basically about like a little upstate New York town, which I did not grow up in upstate New York, but it's a little town that's like basically down on its luck. And the next town over has all the luck. And it’s the story of this man who basically hasn't made much of himself. And he comes to realize he's got to do a little bit better. And it's set at Thanksgiving and it's just a great, great novel that makes me feel like all cozy, you know? So I always read it at Thanksgiving.

Ola: Those are the best ones.

Janette: They are, when you get like the warm fuzzies. I love that.

Leah: And Paul Newman is in the movie, if you want to watch it.

Janette: I am surprised I didn't see that then, because like my mom was very into Paul Newman when I was growing up. Like we watched all of his films, so I'll have to look it up.

Leah: Paul Newman is in two of my favorite book/movie combos. So the other one is Mr. & Mrs. Bridge. Have you seen that movie? Yeah, and that is two novels, one called Mr. Bridge, one called Mrs. Bridge by Evan S. Connell. I'm going through this phase, my son is like, holidays he wants books. And so then I like try to think of ones that I've loved, ones that my dad loved or like, you know, I take recommendations from people of really great books and put them on his gift list and he read Mr. & Mrs. Bridge and really liked it, so.

Janette: That's good. That's high praise if Finn is recommending it.

Ola: Oh yeah.

Leah: Yes, yes.

Ola: Finn approved.

Leah: Finn approved, definitely.

Ola: Put that on a, screw the book club gold stickers. You can just see Finn’s face on a book.

Janette: It's like he needs his own like rating scale, like Rotten Tomatoes, right?

Leah: Yeah, it's like the old two thumbs up used to belong to Siskel and Ebert. Remember them?

Janette: Oh, I’ve been listening to this book about Siskel and Ebert. speaking of them, it's called Opposable Thumbs. It's been really, really great listening to the story of, talk about, like enemies. You know, they did not get along and then they were forced to work together. And by the end it was like this great partnership. So it was an amazing story.

Ola: Kind of like you guys, except you didn't hate each other.

Leah: We were never enemies, no. But all we need is one more preproduction meeting like yesterday, and that might happen.

Janette: Leah don't give all of our secrets away.

Ola: Juicy behind-the-scenes info.

Janette: Okay, well, I think we can probably talk all day about books we’ve read and movies we've seen. But let's go ahead and move into today's episode. And today we're here to talk about programming and we're really excited to have a special guest on this episode. Nichole Folkman is here today.

Nichole: Hello.

Janette: We're really grateful that you were able to join us, Nichole. If you can kind of just get us started and let us know a little bit about yourself, that would be great.

Nichole: So I am Nichole Folkman and I am a school librarian and teacher at Hartsburg-Emden. It is a very tiny rural district in central Illinois. This is my 19th year in education and my seventh, I believe, as the librarian. This year, I also found out very shortly before the start of school that I am the high school English teacher. So I am the district librarian for pre-K through 12 and the only high school English teacher for my district.

So it has offered a lot of new opportunities and challenges and given me a different perspective on what we're doing right now in libraries. I started as a high school English teacher before I transitioned to library, so it's an interesting combination this year.

Janette: So how did you make that first initial switch from the classroom to the library?

Nicole: Well, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my educational career. I was noticing that equity in grading was something that I was struggling with, and although I didn't know it at the time, there were lots of books being written about that very issue that came out while I was a librarian.

So I decided to start just kind of taking some school librarianship classes. I went to ISU on their online program and I figured if nothing else in the world, this will make me a better English teacher, right? And then I really realized that library was where my heart was, because it's all the best parts of being an English teacher without the grading that I was not so into. And so I made that transition. We had our school librarian retired in March of one year and I said to the school, I'm not interested in being an English teacher anymore. I would love to be our school’s librarian. And they selected me for that role and it was fantastic.

Janette: That's amazing. I love stories like that, gives you like good warm fuzzies. But let's, if you don't mind talking a little bit more about like, how did you learn that you were now also going to take on the role of English teacher again? Because this is something a lot of librarians are facing right now, especially because there's an education shortage.

Leah: It’s so common.

Janette: Yeah, it’s very common.

Nichole: Yeah. So I got called in to talk to our brand new administrators during the summer. And that's a nerve-wracking situation, right? You've not met these people. They're brand new. You're not sure what they want when it's summer time and you're being called in. The last time I got called in over the summer, I was told I was the top ten finalist for Illinois Teacher of the Year. So like, that was great. And I was like, maybe it’s good news.

Leah: But it sets your expectations a little high, maybe.

Nichole: It really did. So I went in and they were like, we are so sorry, but our English teacher resigned. We know you're a licensed English teacher. We need you to be the English teacher. And I said, okay, well, we still have to cover library time at the grade school for sure, because that is prep time for the teachers and because it’s really important for the students. Right.

And so I believed that my role at that point was English teacher and not librarian at all. And within the next week, I found out that actually I was all of the everything. All of my job from last year, plus teaching three high school English classes, because that's all we're offering this year. Plus my journalism class that I always had taught at the high school as well.

Leah: Was your school having trouble getting applicants for the position or was it, did it just happen so close to the beginning of school? Because I've seen both happen where no applicants apply, but also if its, time is so short.

Janette: That’s a great question. Great question.

Nichole: It is. Stories seem to differ, but there seemed to have been some applicants and our teacher gave over a month's notice. But we are a very small school. And so when you take a look at our contract and compare it to contracts of other places who are also looking for teachers, it's not a tough decision for a lot of people to make which school they would rather go to.

Leah: That's unfortunately very common, too. The rural schools seem to lose out on that deal.

Nichole: Absolutely. And, you know, I've been here, this is, this school that I teach at is my home district. My grandpa went to school here and graduated here. Both of my parents, all my aunts and uncles, myself, my brother, my husband, my son, we've all gone to this school. I'm a home grown gal and I'm trying to stick around. I would love to see our school continue and keep growing. Our high school is 47 students this year, ninth through 12th grade.

Janette: Yeah. It's hard to walk away from something that has that much of your heart too, right? And you know, you have a lot of history there. That's just, it's an amazing story. Hopefully your situation can improve a little bit, but can you tell everybody a little bit about what your normal day looks like then, when you're splitting your job like that?

So we know that you're in a very, very small school. Like what does that look like? I believe from my own knowledge, is it, you still have a school in each town? One in Hartsburg and one in Emden? So you travel back and forth between the two?

Nichole: I do. So my day this year, I have my morning at the high school, the junior high/high school, and my afternoons at the elementary school. So in the morning, at the junior high/high school, I have English One, English Two, Literature and then Journalism One and Two happen in the same class period. So I teach four full classes over there, kind of five, and then I have travel/lunch time that I come over here to the grade school in our other little town.

And then I have a block of some prep time there to be able to put things together. And I teach two to three classes over at the elementary school, depending on the day. Every class, in a normal full five day week with nothing else going on, I see every class twice a week. So each day I'm teaching between six and eight classes, depending on what day it is and how you want to count the classes.

And I have the prep time to prep and prepare those classes. Any of the library logistics. I have to find time for here and there. So when I teach the classes in the morning, sometimes when they're doing reading workshop or writing workshop, I'll circulate and then I'll process a couple of books, circulate, process a couple of books, because I've got to still check in and out the books, shelve the books process the new books, order the new books.

You know, all of that still has to happen. I had a ton of books I acquired over the summer through grants and DonorsChoose and just my own personal selections because I donate a lot of books to the school. And so I had a couple hundred books I needed to process.

Leah: Did they put anybody in the library in the high school while you're teaching?

Nichole: No. So the library serves as my classroom. Oh, okay. Because I didn't want to be able to be in there and my students have access to all of those books. I've been working on transferring the books from the classroom library in the English room up to the library, just to temporarily house them there. So the kids also have access to those.

Leah: Well, that makes it a little bit better there then, that you're in the library instead of like down the hall or something.

Janette: I'm assuming then when you're in class, it makes, it removes access to the library from other students, right?

Nichole: In a way. We have trained the junior high students to be able to come in and browse quietly and then they do self-checkout. My high school students are used to this as well, so it doesn't bother or distract them when they see the junior high kids. It means that I can't help those junior high kids browse. And then there's also nobody in the library in the afternoon.

The kids are going in again on their own and just browsing. I used to be able to do like little mini lessons once a week with the junior high kids that there's just no time for this year.

Leah: That's too bad.

Janette: What do you think is the single biggest skill that kids are going to miss out on with the arrangement that you have? Like what do you think is going to be the single greatest impact that you foresee?

Nichole: I see one of the greatest difficulties is that I'm kind of losing those middle school kids for right now. And I had been building, I've been their librarian for six years already, right? I had built that rapport. There was trust in me and knowing that my book recommendations were really good for them. And then now I have this bulk of time where I'm going to have almost no interaction with them. Right. I try to interact with them in the hallway, but again, that's my three minutes between my four classes I'm teaching straight in a row. So I think that connection with those junior high students is really what I'm missing.

I do appreciate that I'm making better connections with my high school students now because it was hard to make those connections in the past just with the way that our schedule was and the way that our English teacher was teaching English. So I appreciate that. I was kind of missing the high school kids already, and I had planned to teach a young adult literature class just extra this year anyway. And then plans changed.

Janette: Well, you're I mean, it's awfully nice of you and you're so flexible and adaptable, so. But I wish you all the best with that. And please always reach out if you need any help. Everybody is here to support you for sure.

Nichole: Thank you.

Janette: The most important question I'm going to ask you in this episode is,

Leah: Is this the icebreaker? Because I was going to remind you not to forget the icebreaker.

Janette: It is, yeah. So we're asking all the guests that join us on the podcast, this very important question, and it's what kind of reader are you? Would you say that you are an e-book reader, primarily? A print reader, primarily? Or an audiobook reader, primarily?

Nichole: I would primarily be a print book reader. I also really love audiobooks, but e-books do not work for me. The not being able to like see the progress of the book doesn't work for my brain. I can't do it. It's very much a struggle, but I like to do a lot of print books. I make my post on Instagram, so I take the pictures of them and all of that. So definitely a print book reader.

Janette: So hardcover or paperback?

Nichole: No preference.

Janette: Nice. I like it.

Leah: I have to tell you that I have recently converted to being an e-book reader.

Nichole: Yeah?

Leah: But I do find myself like sometimes, like I hit that, I tap it and then it like, pulls out a little bit and tells me how much is left in the book because sometimes you’re reading and you're reading and you’re reading, and you’re like am I getting near the end? It does bother me, yes.

Nichole: I can't stand it. It doesn't work for me.

Leah: Yes, I need that sometimes.

Janette: I do have the, I have to always have the percentage displayed in the corner of my Kindle, like because I need to know like, where am I? Am I at 20%? Because sometimes, too, like you're in the plot progression and you're like, there's too much conflict and it's only 35%. Like what's going to happen after this?

Leah: Or when you're getting near the end and you're like, she has got to fix this before this book is over.

Janette: Or there's not enough time left to fix it, like what’s going to happen? So yeah, anyway.

Nichole:

One of the things that they have, and I'm sure there's a way for me to get rid of it. But on the like bottom left on mine, it'll tell me how much time is left in the book and I’m like, oh really? Two and a half hours? I think that's maybe two. Then I don't really read it. It's terrible, I can't do it.

Janette: That's based on averages that are like all the users who read that book. And I'm a very, very slow reader. So if it tells me there's like three hours left, I'm like, that's like five. That's five in Janette time. Like, that's not three hours.

Well, that brings us to let's go ahead and move into the episode topic for today, if you're all right with that. That brings us to today's topic. And that's programming in school libraries. So you have a school library, you're a school librarian and now what? Right. And it's really, really important to talk about drawing students into the library. And I think this is one of the things Leah really drove home to me when we were preparing for this episode is like, you cannot overstate the importance of bringing students in because without that, a lot of the work can't be done, right? You've got to get students engaged. So just to get us started off, I wanted to ask you, you know, what are some ideas you have for making the library a cool place to visit?

Nichole: So one of the things is having really wonderful, like, seating and furniture, right? And making it look and feel comfortable and welcoming. And that can be hard to do sometimes with budgets. And I know that a couple years ago, like, my school had to get rid of all of their soft stuff with COVID and put it in storage. And then when it came back out of storage, it wasn't usable any longer. And there hasn't been budget yet to replace that and fix that. But if you can make it seem like a comfortable and wonderful place, the kind of nooks that we would love to read in ourselves, that helps a lot.

Being able to have some time in a schedule where they're allowed to be in there can be a really big struggle as well. Depends on if your school has flexible enough scheduling, if you're allowed to let them in during lunch or before school or after school, that can make a huge difference as well.

Leah: I have to brag about my former library, the one that I was in. It had like four huge banks of windows, which really I mean, it was a nightmare to deal with like all the UV, but they built in some window seats for all four windows. It’s just the perfect thing to have in a library is a window seat.

Janette: You're like children, get your own books. I'll be over here.

Leah: Yeah, I'll be over here.

Janette: Mrs. Gregory is just going to be over here if you need me. That sounds amazing. I would love a space like that.

Nichole: Just having, like, the entranceway, being welcoming and exciting. Having like, if you can have displays or elements that draw them in to want to look closer and come inside, that can be hugely helpful as well. One of the things that I've tried to do in the past is I would put, you know, and this is not a new idea, but if you haven't done it yet, it's worth a try. Making flyers and putting them in the bathrooms, reminding the kids about cool programming that's happening or interesting new books that you have, or the Readers Choice Award books that are available, those things can help draw, because I saw this book and it looked really interesting. Do you have it? Absolutely. Put it in the announcements and talk about it in, you know, if you have the morning P.A. announcements or an online news thing for your school, those can help as well.

Leah: I have a question for you related, so I was fascinated by the fact, so you're basically the librarian for these kids from kindergarten to when they graduate.

Nichole: Yes.

Leah: And I'm thinking, well that sounds like that is one way to make a welcoming space because they know you and they've always known you and they've grown up with you and they trust you. But like, do you feel like maybe it goes the other way sometimes? Like, that's just the library, it’s always been the same. It might it might be both there.

Nichole: Absolutely. And I think that those both exist at the same time. Our sixth graders, when they changed buildings, I know there were a few of them that came in and they're like, I don't know where my locker is, Mrs. Folkman, can you help me? Because they did, it was a face they recognized, right? A person they were comfortable with. And that was wonderful. But then, yeah, there is that like, we're used to you. You do the same thing. So you have to like, get yourself out of that rut and make sure you're trying new and exciting things throughout time as well.

Janette: I'm curious where in your buildings is the library located? Because I wonder how much that has an impact too, like, you know, students are walking past it every day. Like I think about my kids. My kids largely grew up in metro Atlanta and they were in fairly new school buildings, so their libraries were front and center, kind of in the heart of the school. But I know in a lot of older buildings it's not quite that way.

Nichole: Yeah, my grade school building is about 113 years old, and my elementary library also serves as the school office, the head teacher's office, the teacher's lounge, the copy room, the everything. So it is very centrally located, but our fixed schedule means that we're not actually in there because when the students are in there, they're also hearing every phone call that comes in, right? It doesn't work out well. So I do their classes in their classroom and bring them into the library for checkouts, which is less than ideal.

And then in my junior high/high school building, it's about 100, 203 years old. It is upstairs in the junior high section of the school that the high schoolers don't necessarily come to unless they're coming upstairs for music or to go to the guidance counselors office, which is right next door, which is helpful because a lot of kids do go by there and then, you know, they want a book and their guidance counselor sometimes recommends they go, oh, Mrs. Folkman has some books that might help you with that issue. It's wonderful. That's another great way, make those connections with the other people in your school.

Leah: That is a great point to make, because like, a good way to get kids in is to have somebody else tell them that they should go there because, you know, it's like you're, you know, if you're the one telling them, they're like, well, you know, it's like if you recommend something to your own child as the librarian, they're like, you don't know what you're talking about.

Nichole: Yeah, and our previous librarian, she left when she retired and she recommended excellent books to our kids all the time. But they weren't sure if they could trust her recommendations. And I kept promising them. I'm like, oh no, every time I read one of these books, they're wonderful. And then I book talk to them to you the next week, and you eat them up. So, yeah, having other people, being able to talk up the library, talk up the books that are there, talk about what they are reading. That is hugely helpful.

Leah: So do you have any time for the kids to come in like on free choice? You said the junior high kids can wander through. Have you lost a little bit of that with your new reality?

Nichole: Yeah, it definitely has been less. Their teachers don't hesitate to send them, which is wonderful because I reassured them that I wanted them and it was totally fine. And, you know, these are just our parameters and we're going to work with it and it’ll be fantastic. But the whole class doesn't come anymore. So some kids who are more hesitant to come by and take a look aren't really looking and so they're not noticing those new books. And I don't have as much time this year to make things like the flyers and do that kind of outreach like I'd like to.

Janette: I'm thinking too, about, like the amount of time just, you know, you already spoke a little bit about just all those tasks that librarians have to do anyway. And then on top of that, being a classroom teacher, and I'm thinking about like English teachers in general and the amount of time it takes to grade that work, right? It's not like everything is a very short form essay. Sometimes it's long papers and probably a lot of time outside of school to also make it through all of those.

Leah: English teachers definitely have the grading burden to work with. So I totally, like, mad props to you because that is a lot of work. Right? Especially when you're the only English teacher.

Nichole: Yeah.

Leah: So I used to say that the librarian was the best job in the building because you didn't have to grade. But you do now, so I’m sorry.

Nichole: My grade school, I don't have to grade any of the library stuff, so that helps. But yeah, the grading and finding that time to be able to balance everything has really, truly been a struggle this year. And I just keep telling the students, I have the same goals for you that I had as a librarian. I want you to read, I want you to write, I want you to create, I want you to find your voice and I want you to grow. If we're going to do those things this year, I think we'll all be happy and we'll make it through. If I can tell your parents or your grown ups that that's what's happening and that's what we're doing, If I can communicate that to them in some way, we'll be good to go.

Janette: That's amazing. And then how do you find time for your own personal reading? Because I'm thinking like as librarians, a lot of the time, like you said, you're reading books to book talk, you're reading books for your collection to make sure that they're appropriate. But then you have books you want to read yourself, right? So like, where does that fit in? Is that like a summer only? Is that going to be like winter break is spent reading?

Nichole: Well, my probably dirty little reading secret is that I don't like books written for adults. I don't.

Janette: Fair. There’s a lot of people who are like that.

Nichole: I strongly prefer children's books and young adult books. I think they're so much better. I've never understood the kind of hatred that young adult literature gets that it's so simplistic or it's too optimistic or things like that. I'm like, but have you read adult books? Yeah. Like they're really formulaic a lot of the time and that's great. But I love them for the people who love them, right? I would never bad talk a book, particularly at least, but they're not for me. So I really love to read what I need to read for my job and occasionally it can feel a little bit of a burden. But most of the time I'm thrilled to pieces to be able to just turn everything off and sit down and read for the night.

Now, I'm not necessarily an organized person in general, but in terms of my book reading, I have like color-coded spreadsheets so that I make sure that I'm reading children's, middle grade, middle school, and YA, and never like only staying in one because I would read YA all the time.

Janette: We've had a couple of discussions, Leah and I, outside of the podcast about like how we're so grateful that the young adult genre is so like prolific. It wasn't like that when we were growing up.

Leah: Definitely not.

Janette: And I would talk about like raising kids who have books that are written for them. Like I got booted straight from like, you know, young, like children's literature to like Stephen King in middle school. So I'm like, that was probably not the healthiest thing to happen to a like, you know, 12 year old. Yeah. So yeah, a little bit scared, but it's okay. We're all fine.

Leah: I remember the year that I started working in a school library because I was like a late-in-life librarian, I switched careers. It was Twilight and The Hunger Games. And those, like, took off with adults too. And I was like so thrilled because it was so much fun because I was reading them. But like a lot of our teachers had read them, a lot of the parents had read them. So it was great to talk about.

So I think anything that can get an adult reading young adult books, because I feel like if you read them and talk about them with kids, there's never a reason to be worried about what's in a book, especially if you read it and talk about it. So I think that is great and I think it's great that so many adults are embracing that because, I mean, being an adult is already hard enough. I mean, why not read something fun.

Janette: I mean, a lot of people do read for escape, right? Like it's leisurely for a reason, right. It's, yeah. You have to make sure that you make time for the things that de-stress you. So what other things do we need to consider like programming-wise? What are some other practical things that you can think of that factor into what kinds of programs you might offer in your school?

Nichole: I think for me, one of the places that I always try to start is with the teenagers. Asking them what they're into, what they're interested in, what don't they have time for? What do they wish they had more time or opportunity to do? And then if you're able, look at trends on TikTok, on Instagram, whatever your preferred social media is, hopefully one that also the teens are on and seeing like what's cool right now, right? Kids are into rocks and minerals and gems, they're into astrology, they're into pets. Like I had a student today talking about being a pet parent, right, as a high schooler, that's not the vocabulary we would have used. We would just been like, Yeah, I have a cat, right? But it means so much more to them in some ways right now.

Plants. Plants are really huge with a lot of the kids right now. Right. So looking at what teenagers are doing, teenagers right now are the tail-end of Gen Z, right. And so looking at what they're interested in and trying to find things to connect with them that way, asking them what they're into. Because I think a lot of times we want to plan around them, but we can plan with them and be that much more successful.

Leah: I think that's a great idea. I always was like, somebody would ask, are we going to do? What are we going to do? And I would be like, well let’s ask the kids, they’ll tell us what they want. And that's how I pretty much did everything in the library. Like all my book orders, I was like, I didn't have to work that hard because they told me what they wanted. I just had to go and make sure that, you know, they're appropriate.

Nichole: Absolutely.

Leah: Yeah. And the other thing that you mention is like, ask them what they're into, and then you can tweak programs because like, for example, book club. Everybody associates book club with libraries. Yeah. And I think book clubs are a great thing and every library should have one if they wanted to. But our book club was really weird because we did not have the ability to get a copy of the same book for every book club kid. So we did not do the traditional read the same book and talk about it. So we just had a book club where we did things associated with books, and that's when I started asking the kids, what would you like to do? And like a ton of them wanted to color. So I just had all these great like book-themed coloring books, and that was book club for some of those kids.

Janette: That sounds cool. Like I've seen school libraries where they do almost like a genre book club, so it's like it'll be mystery month, so you can read whatever mystery you want and then everybody comes and almost does their own little mini book talk. And it's a great way for other kids to learn about books. And I'm sorry, we can recommend all the books we want until we're blue in the face, but peer recommendations go a long way right. You know, if ten of your friends have all read this, I mean, we do it as adults, right? Like ten people say, I read this book and it's really great. Like, well, I'm missing out. Like, I've got to read this book now, too. So, it works.

Leah: Definitely.

Nichole: And the silent book clubs as well, you know, like where you all, you're going to bring a book. We might chat a little at the beginning and maybe have some snacks. Then we're going to have silent reading time because it's devoted time, right? Kids are over-scheduled often, and they don't always have that time to be able to sit down and read. And then maybe have some chat time at the end and you recommend books or you read a quote from something you read that day that you absolutely love. I've seen those being very popular as well.

Leah: Have you guys seen this? I saw it, like, it was like a funny tweet or something like that. The mom asked the child, what do you want to do for your birthday? The child says, I want a book potato party and the mom is like a book potato party? And he goes, yeah, we're going to have seven different kinds of potato snacks and we all just read our books. And I'm like, you know what? I would kill to go to a party like that.

Janette: I'm planning one right now, Leah.

Leah: Right now? Well, invite me. Nine times out of ten when I get invited to parties, I'm just like, my social anxiety kicks in. I'm like, no fun. I would come to a book potato party, so.

Janette: One of the most successful book clubs I've ever been in is actually a virtual book club. It does not meet in person. I have friends from all over the country, all over the world, really, in this club. And so, like one of our dreams is to just have a retreat where it's a reading retreat where you literally just all get together in one place and everyone just reads. And at night you talk about it. And I was like, that is still one of my dream vacation ideas.

Nichole: That sounds amazing.

Janette: Yeah. Like, what does that say about me? Introvert, but, you know, whatever.

Leah: I used to go to a craft camp very similar to that. You bring your craft. You craft all day. And then at night we like, socialize a little bit and like, share, like ideas of like the craft.

Janette: Sounds like a great way to recharge, anyway.

Leah: Yes.

Nichole: Well, now, with being able to do things virtually so easily, it is so great to be able to if you have sort of a more traditional book club, you can connect with authors and illustrators so much more easily now. You can do a virtual visit. Some do them for free, some do them for a small fee. But you can make those connections really easily and involve more people or you can pair up with another school.

Janette: No, that is a really great point though, because I think one of the things that did come out of the pandemic is this virtual lifestyle or access. And you do have access to authors and, you know, a lot of different things that you didn't have before. And you can share expense, you know, so maybe you don't have the funds in your own library to afford that author that your kids really, really want to see. But you could, you know, share that with a couple other schools. That's a great idea.

Leah: We had an author visit and it was like well before the pandemic, but we had Kimberly Pauley. She's the author of a book called Sucks to Be Me. It's about a teenage vampire. And so it was before Zoom, it was a Skype visit for any library that bought her books. So if you purchased her book, she would offer that for free. So then I emailed her and I'm like, hi Ms. Pauley, how do I prove that I bought the book? So she goes, well, I trust you. If you can't trust librarians, who can you trust? But I will say that program, like, made me like, queen for a day, because everybody was, all the kids were like, that was so cool. So I strongly recommend doing that if you can.

Nichole: Yeah, there are so many giveaways online. Like if you follow authors and illustrators you love on social media sometimes, especially when they have a book release coming up, they might offer a free author visit like to someone random who comments and things like that. And I've won a few that way as well and it's been a fantastic experience for my students to get to experience a lot of different ways in which authors can visit.

Janette: So I was curious to know, do you have makerspaces in your libraries?

Nichole: Not at my grade school. There's not enough space to be able to do it, and the kids aren't really in there either. At the high school, I have materials for a couple of things for a makerspace, I have a 3D printer as well as some coding robots. Finding the time in the schedule for my math or science teachers to use them or for me to train people on how to use them has been difficult over the past couple of years, but it's been a blessing to have them because the kids do enjoy learning about them when we get the chance.

Janette: I feel like makerspaces are another great way to bring like non-readers into the library, right? And there's all different kinds of things you can put in. Like you've already mentioned, there's several different kind of types of, and people always think crafts, right? But it's, it’s robotics.

Leah: It’s actually tech, yeah.

Janette: Yeah, it's a lot of things.

Leah: I always felt like, we didn't have a makerspace. I had some of the, like you do. I have some of those kits in my old library, but I felt very intimidated. And this is why, like I would have loved a podcast like this because I would be like, there's nobody I can ask. I can't go up to somebody and say, I don't think I could do very well at a makerspace, and I'm afraid to try. So like, it would be great to hear from other people who are like, that really scared me too, and here's what I did. So I do think if you're interested in doing a makerspace, you can dive in with a kit. You don't have to be like a tech superstar.

Janette: Well, and I’ve seem some, I love to look at pictures that people post online of the areas in their library that are makerspaces. And oftentimes they're even just a table that will have like virtual reality equipment and a computer with the 3D printer or, you know, the supplies are there. And it's like that's all it really takes. It's just a small area. And if there's enough interest, maybe you do look at growing that over time.

But again, like one of the things we haven't really talked about, which I wanted to get to, is talking about funding and what that looks like, you know, for programing when you don't have a lot of financial resources. Because I think that's also one of the things that kind of limits people with regard to exploring makerspaces.

Nichole: Definitely. So one of the things that I have had success with is writing grants and I just, part of it is at conferences, I will go through the exhibit hall and I will talk to everybody and I will get on every email list. And I know lots of people really hate having tons of emails and email newsletters, but then I'll have giveaways in there and they'll talk about grants that they have coming up, or even if they don't host any grants, some of them have, here are grants we know people have been successful with in the past, and that's a great source, whether you use it for their products or for something else. That's a great way to get more ideas for what grants are out there that you can write for.

And that takes time to be able to do, to find the grants and write the grants. But if you think of it the way that we talk to our students about scholarships, right? When we tell our students about scholarships, we don't say, well, two million people are going to enter that. There's no way you're getting it. Don't spend the time on it. We say, you can't win it if you didn't enter it, right? Think about and think wisely, maybe, about which ones deserve your time and which ones don't. But you can't be told yes if you don't ask. And there are lots of organizations in the state of Illinois, even, regionally, locally, statewide, that offer a lot of wonderful grants that we could be applying for. Professional organizations have grants and awards and sometimes research grants, even, that you can participate in and get some wonderful resources for your school.

Leah: And also especially in smaller communities, if you ask local businesses. Like we had a little craft store and they had a bunch of yarn that was kind of like, you know, not this year's yarn, I guess. And they were happy to donate it to the book club. And then that became like part of our big crafts supplies. And I had so much yarn, we didn't have to spend a dime for that.

So it becomes, you know, a way of creatively asking, you know, and you're exactly right. I always tell everybody, I'm like, if you ask, ask politely. And the worst thing they can say is, no, you know. If they say, no, you're an idiot for asking, well you've met somebody who's not very nice, you know. But nine times out of ten the worst thing that's going to happen is they'll just be like, we can't do that right now. And that's fine. You are so right.

Janette: I think the asking is the hard part, though, right? I mean.

Leah: It can be very, yes.

Janette: That can be the hurdle. So let's talk a little bit about what doesn't work. Like have you ever come across any programming you've tried that maybe didn't really go over the way you expected?

Nichole: I have tried to start book clubs in my library and I have been unsuccessful. And part of it is because in a small school everyone has to participate in everything for it to happen, right? So after school, there's always basketball practice and volleyball practice and chess practice. And I've got kids that are probably in at least two of those things.

So finding time, especially between two buildings, has been what's been rough for me. So you have to think about your demographics and what's going to work for them. If I had my wish, I would do like an over-lunch book club probably because that I think would be more successful. I think the idea of book club was fine, but my timing is what didn't work.

So having that reflection then after you try something and maybe fail or aren't as successful as you'd like to be, reflect and see which parts of it you might be able to fix and just tweak to make it better.

Janette: Yeah, I mean, the thing that's really tricky about programming in general is it's not one size fits all, right. So large schools, small schools, all the schools in between are going to have different challenges with regard to what actually can work for their students.

Leah: That's so true, because you can just, like, we did so many crafts because we just happened to have a group of students who were especially crafty. But there are like middle school students who don't enjoy crafts. So I always tell people like, if whatever you tried didn't work, it doesn't mean that you weren't good at it or that nothing is not, you know, nothing's going to work. It just means that that one thing that you tried didn't work and you can tweak it a little bit or you can try something completely different.

Nichole: Right. And absolutely. And like different generations of our kids as they come through, it might not have worked this year, but in three years it might be perfect because just a different group of kids have come through and cycled through. And feelings are different. You know.

Janette: I think it's just reframing what success and failure look like, right? So, you know, people always talk about how, you know, if something didn't fail, then I'm just, it's not a good idea. But that's not always the reality. Right? Didn't work right now, but maybe, like you said in a couple of years it would. Or you know, they talk a lot about, too, about program attendance. It's like, well, only five kids showed up, but those five kids needed that program.

Nichole: Yes.

Janette: So it is a success. And on some level, it just has to, you have to change how you measure it, I guess.

Leah: Those five kids had the time of their lives and that is worth something, you know?

Janette: Yes, absolutely. So I want to move into kind of a new segment for us. We asked for this episode, for our listeners to write in about what they have done to get students excited about going to the school library. And we want to share some of those with you. Ola is going to join us and she'll read the submissions as we go through.

Ola: All right. Our first submission is from Steven and Steven is from Red Hill Junior and Senior High. And Steven writes, when I first came on about five years ago, the library had white walls and nothing but wooden tables and chairs. It was very institutional. Over the past few years, I have painted the library with a warm color scheme and replaced most tables and chairs with gently-used couches and chairs, keeps a stash of blankets for the students to curl up with on the couch to read.

I created a book fireplace with orange lights to simulate a roaring fire. I reorganized the books by genre to give it a bookstore feel as opposed to a library. I got approval to put a small coffee shop into our library that is used by teachers and students. Both our junior high and senior high English classes have scheduled class times each week to visit, and during our study hall, we are open with a student lounge slash coffee house vibe.

Nichole: That's amazing. I want to go there.

Leah: Exactly. I'm like, who wouldn’t want to go in there? Everybody wants to go in there.

Janette: I would have spent a lot of time in in a school library that had a coffee shop for sure.

Leah: I would spend a lot of time anywhere that has a lot of blankets. That's like my, blankets are my favorite thing.

Janette: Yeah. I mean, I think it really, that, what he's describing is like a feeling that you get walking into a space like that. Right, like, and you want kids to feel like they are welcome, that it's not a place where they have to feel out of place or yes, obviously there's standards of behavior in a school building, but like, it's a place to kind of relax and like decompress, right? I mean, school is hard. Academic rigor is, that stress is real. So you need those places in your school for kids to feel like they can just kind of relax.

Leah: That is what breaks my heart the most is when a student feels unsure about going into a library or a person feels unsure about going into a public library because I'm like the number one thing that librarians want is for you to come in and they don't care about anything about you. Like they don't care you're about your socio-economic status. fThey don't care if you can't read very well, they just want you to come in. So I think that any way that you can convey that, like, we would love for you to be here is just a great, great way to start.

Nichole: And it's nice that it seems at least that there would be some support there because the scheduling is allowed for the students to come in during study halls. The English teachers are on board with bringing their students in. The admin are okay with all of the changes that they've made. That, it seems, like a wonderful, supportive environment to make everyone feel welcome and wonderful.

Janette: I think you make a really good point though, too, how a lot of this, like I think as librarians you can feel like a lot of the weight of this lies just on your shoulders, but that collaboration and getting all of those people involved and partnering in that way is really key to the success of some of this.

Leah: And I really hate when rules get in the way of great, welcoming, like I wanted kids to be able to come in in the morning, but the rule was nobody could come in before that bell rang. And once the bell rang, they had, you know, a very limited time to get to homeroom. And I'm just like, I want them to come in. And I fought that one for a long time. So I'm like, okay, we're going to welcome them in all the other times of the day.

Nichole: Yes.

Ola: Take what you can. Yeah.

Leah: Exactly.

Ola: All right. Donna from Cissna Park Community Library writes, one of our best programs was held during the men's NCAA tournament. Instead of March Madness, we had Oreo Madness. Our sweet sixteen consisted of different flavors of Oreos. High school students filled out brackets ahead of time, predicting the winner. The students then came to the library to taste test for two weeks and voted on their favorites. After the winner was announced, double-stuff narrowly beat peanut butter pie. The person with the most points in their bracket won a prize. Of course, it was Oreos. In general, any program with competition and food is a hit.

Leah: Anytime you do food, it's generally a good thing.

Nichole: I would say that is one that I would take a million pictures of and tag Oreo and Nabisco in and see if you could get some like, sponsorship kind of deal out of that. Even if they send you just a box of Oreos to share with the kids, that’s amazing.

Ola: They would be so thrilled.

Leah: Okay. Is it just me? Are there 16 flavors of Oreos?

Janette: There are so many.

Ola: They never stop. Every time I go to the grocery store, there's a new flavor of Oreo.

Janette: I think there's like five different types of just chocolate Oreos. Like, it's like dark chocolate. Like you have, like, brownie. You have I mean, there's a million.

Ola: But peanut butter pie I didn't know existed, but now I'm going to be hunting that down.

Leah: I do love the true, I love the classic Oreo.

Ola: So I have an unpopular opinion.

Leah: Okay, what’s your unpopular opinion? Let's hear it.

Ola: I prefer golden Oreos over the regular Oreo.

Janette: I think we need a new producer.

Leah: Yeah, exactly. My son prefers lemon Oreos.

Ola: I know. I just, there's something about it.

Leah: That's what makes the world go round. We don't all have to agree.

Janette: They do have their place. It's fine.

Nichole: So many chip flavors these days too. You could do that if you didn't want to do Oreos. You could do chips with that really easily.

Ola: Oh yeah.

Janette: I'm just like, my brain goes to gummy bears. Sorry, I'm a gummy candy person, so I'm like, all the flavors. And then there's maybe not 16 different flavors of gummy bears, but you can have all the different, like gummy worms, gummy bears, gummy.

Ola: Or just the different colors of gummy bears.

Janette Yes.

Ola: Because pinks taste better than the greens.

Janette: Yes, definitely.

Leah: And like, that's true for Skittles as well. Like, you know. So yeah, you could do, there's so many ways you can like take that one.

Ola: Absolutely.

Janette: Thank you, Donna, you've just made me hungry.

Leah: And I've seen March Madness done with no food and just for books, so.

Ola: Oh yeah.

Leah: That’s fun, too.

Ola: There's just so many different variables you could plug in there. Amy from Mount Zion High School writes, every month I order new books and I make a Canva video showcasing all of the new books. This video is sent out via email to all the students and played on the library TV during study hall. I keep the ten newest videos available on a website I created for the library. This really helps get the books in student's hands when some don't have a chance to walk through the library to browse. If anything sparks their interest, they will make a point to come in and get it.

Amy also says, I hold a puzzle race every quarter. The students that come to these sometimes aren't readers, but it gets them in the library if they're waiting around. Most of them usually walk around and browse the shelves. They may not check something out, but at least they're looking.

Janette: I love the first part because it's basically like a book commercial to me. Like, and I love to watch like book trailers and things like that online. So I'm just imagining how amazing that would be because you're essentially being advertised all these books and you can go in and just pick up the one you want.

Leah: That is brilliant. I love that.

Nichole: And those puzzle races are really popular now too. I've been seeing a lot of public libraries do puzzle races and puzzle trades.

Leah: Puzzle races here are a huge fundraiser. You pay to enter, kind of like a trivia table. You can bring your team. We were laughing because we were telling somebody about it and they're like, they had never heard of it. And we're like, is this just a Southern Illinois thing? But I think it's starting to spread. So I've never been to a puzzle race because I will tell you, puzzles frustrate me enormously. So I don't know if I can handle that, but I think it sounds great.

Janette: I like that as a way to get non-readers in. I think also like roleplayer games and video games are another way that a lot of librarians say that they use to bring in non-readers and kind of create that sense of community in their space, which I really like.

Ola: Yeah, I like the concept of the library doesn't necessarily need to be about reading. It can just be a safe space.

Leah: I offered up the library right after school for the team to wait for the bus. So I had all these sports kids in the library and I was never one who cared about food, so they got to have their snack there before they went off to whatever. And that was a huge way. So if you can open up your library some way for those non-readers to come in, because then they remember that you were nice to them or that it's not so scary to go in. So strongly recommend getting non-readers.

Ola: Next up, we have Barb, who is actually from RAILS, but she was formerly a school librarian. So she writes, I turned the 2009 Read for the Record into a week-long event involving grades kindergarten through eighth grade. I worked collaboratively with nearly every teacher to coordinate events leading up to the actual Read for the Record Day. We created two giant six-to-eight feet characters from the book, caterpillar and a butterfly, to be hung from our cathedral-style ceiling in the library with fishing line.

So the way she did this, she writes grades three through five worked with the art teacher to paint the pieces. I paired middle schoolers with primary classes, so kindergartners with eighth graders, first with seventh, two with sixth, and the big kids stapled pieces together to create giant pouches that they helped the littles crumple newspaper and fill them with. The kids worked together to bring the pieces to the library where we connected them together and our custodian helped me hang them from the exposed rafters in the library. They were up there for almost five years.

Janette: Wow.

Nichole: That’s so cool.

Janette: Have either of you, or I mean OIa, even you, I guess any of you, participated in Read for the Record?

Leah: I never have. Nope.

Janette: So I only ever have as an adult actually, like I would just read the book and go online and log my reading. But it's basically, you know, to set records for certain books. And it's a, this is a program that's put on by Jumpstart, and they select a book every year. This year's book is Piper Chen Sings by Phillipa Soo, and I'm going to butcher this other author's name, I apologize, it’s Maris Pasquale Doran, I think. And it's illustrated by Qin Leng and it's a gorgeous book that is about a little girl who loves to sing but is overwhelmed with nervousness about singing in front of other people. So I think that's like such a great lesson too, right. This year's was held on October 24th. There's always one day every year that everybody's, you know, meant to come together to read the book and then log their read, so. It’s a great program.

Leah: And we cannot, we cannot skip over the programming opportunities that the AISLE Readers Choice Award programs offer, because that was always a huge one for me, Rebecca Caudill was for middle school, because that's what I taught. And I personally, and we can like debate this a little bit, but I loved reading programs that were not competitive because I did not want to pit kids against each other because my son got drawn into this huge competitive thing. So he ended up reading Moby Dick in third grade and was terrified of whales for many, many years. And I was just like, why are you even reading that? And he’s like, because somebody said I couldn't. So competitive reading programs caused a problems in my house. So I always liked the reading programs that were not competitive or you’re just like, the children are trying to improve their own time.

Janette: The importance of age appropriate materials. Let's just reinforce that.

Leah: And Read for the Record sounds like a really great program.

Janette: The thing that speaks to me about it is the community building, right? Like, that's really what this is about. And I think about the collaboration that Barb mentions with all those different people within her building. And it's like kids love stuff like that. I remember projects like that growing up in my elementary school where you're making something in art that's also related to something you're doing in English, or your English class that's related to, and then you see it all come together. It's like really satisfying. And then they get this sense that they're all part of something bigger, which I think is part of, you know, in libraries we talk a lot about how this isn't just about reading a book. It is about life skills and life experiences. And all of those many things. And this is just one of the ways that we enrich all of that.

Nichole: And I also love the pairing the older kids with the younger kids. There are lots of really cool ways to do that, whether it's middle schoolers with the grade schoolers or high schoolers with the grade schoolers. I'm also the sponsor of our Educators Rising program, and a lot of schools will have something like that and giving them opportunities to work with the younger kids and through books in the library could be a really wonderful experience for everyone.

Leah: We did that in my school. It was the Junior Beta Club. It's very similar to like other honors clubs.

Janette: I was a member of Junior Beta Club.

Leah: Oh good, I was the sponsor for many years. I did not have a Junior Beta Club when I was growing up.

Janette: I was very nerdy, sorry. As if that comes as any surprise to anyone.

Leah: Really, Janette? I would not have guessed that.

Janette: Sorry. Okay.

Leah: But we, the kids needed to earn community service hours and so we would take the bigger kids over to read to the little kids. And it was such a big hit because the big kids felt like really like, you know, they're in charge. And the little kids love it. Especially like if you got a brother and sister. Like it was the one time they could get along with each other. And that is a great programming idea. And people forget you're not like confined to your building because you're trying to raise community members. I mean, you're not just trying to teach these kids. And that's why I always say, like you're trying to get them to be contributing members of society. So try to remind them sometimes that there's a life outside the school building.

Nichole: Yes.

Ola: Kelly from South Park School writes, some things I do to promote engagement include Bluestem book chats, where the kids can come and chat with me about the books they've read on the list for the Illinois Bluestem Award. I also hold a parent-student book club for each grade and recess reads where kids listen to a book read aloud.

We also have evening family reading nights every year, and this year we're planning a special one just for preschool. And then Kelly also adds on, I also have a student library squad which helps plan events and contributes ideas to promote the library, which also provides an opportunity for student engagement.

Janette: I love Kelly’s submission because it talks a little bit to what we were saying earlier about how you just ask the kids what they want, right? I mean, if you have a whole group of students that are engaged in that way, that are willing to contribute, I mean, they learn a lot of like project management and project planning skills on their end. And then you get to make sure you have a better chance of planning programs that students are going to want to attend, that they're going to find valuable.

Leah: And I also love that she has her Bluestem chats and that time with her is a reward. And I love that because I was always trying to come up with prizes that didn't cost me any money. So one prize was like, if you read enough of the Rebecca Caudill books, you could earn a prize. One prize was you could come in and have lunch in the library with me. And that was fun. Like, I was a little bit nervous because like, is there going to be anybody who wants that? You could also earn a prize to go to the front of the hold line for a very popular book.

And then the other thing, the number one most requested prize, the one that everybody wanted, is they wanted to come work in the library for an hour.

Ola: Be a librarian for a day.

Leah: So I would let them win the prize to come in and like stamp cards or like, I don't know, like move the books under the barcode reader.

Ola: There's nothing more satisfying than that beep from the barcode scanner.

Nichole: My high schoolers love it, too. Like it goes all the way up.

Leah: I love all of these submissions because it just shows like, first of all, I think all of them show the love that these librarians have for their job and for their kids and for literacy. And also it shows their creativity because they're thinking of things like, what can I do? What more can I do? And I think that's so true of the librarians that I have been privileged to meet is there is nothing they won't do to get those kids in the library. And then, you know, our secret agenda is to get them to read. But we start with just getting them to come through the door.

Janette: I think it's important to say to Leah's point about, you know, people are doing a lot and they're creative and they're coming up these great ideas and constantly thinking and growing and changing. But I do want to like, reinforce the idea or really state that, you know, if you are someone who's showing up every day and doing your best for your students and your school, that is enough, right.

So, you know, these programming ideas don't have to be big and expensive and flashy and showy. People are listening to this to get great new ideas that are going to generate energy and excitement in the schools that they're in. And who doesn't love that, right? But school librarians are already out there doing really amazing work each and every day.

So, Nichole, I wanted to ask you, like, what would you tell a school librarian that's struggling to get the results that they want?

Nichole: Yeah, I think that it starts with a lot of reflection and a lot of goal setting. Set yourself small goals and big goals because you want to see successes in lots of different ways and make sure that you do remind yourself that if the kids are happy, if they're learning, if they have access to books, we want them to feel safe. We want them to have access. We want them to see themselves in their books. And if we're doing that, that's the most important thing. And you can build and grow.

You don't have to do everything this year. Find ways to start getting good at this piece of the job or this program, and then write yourself a goal for next year, you’re going to do something else, right? Figure out what works for you personally. Just like I tell my students, right? You are learning how to do this job. You are learning how to do this class. You're learning really how your brain functions for the tasks you need to do. So just go with it and give yourself as much grace as you would give somebody else.

Leah: That's such a good reminder, because I think, like Janette and I always discuss how we are the most hard on our own selves, you know? And we had this discussion, I feel like for every topic that we discuss on this and again, it's only two and now three. So 100% of the time we've had this discussion where some days you just show up and that's all you can do. But by showing up, you're showing up for the kids. And that is a very important thing to do. And if you can't come up with a programming idea this month, that's okay. You've kept the door open. You've showed them that you're glad to see them when they come in the door. And that, I think, is like the number one thing you can do.

Janette: One of my favorite expressions that it's really taken me a long time to embrace is that giving 100% looks different every day. You can only do the best you can do each and every day. And some days that's a lot more than other days. And then you have to kind of give yourself the grace to do that and allow that.

Nichole: Very much. I could not agree more.

Janette: It’s so hard. So it's a great segue into our closing segment for the episode, which we like to call Shelf Care, and that's where we talk about how you're taking care of yourself and your mental health in the library. Nichole, we're going to ask you, we're putting you on the spot, you know, what are you doing? What’s one of the things that you're doing to take care of yourself right now?

Nichole: All right. This is going to sound like not taking care of myself, but stick with me a second. So one of my favorite things to do on the weekends is I will pack my car full of books and I will go to either little free libraries or an event, and I will give away books to people. It is so good for my soul to be able to talk to families and kids and tell them about how great reading is and how exciting it is.

They’re library discards or they’re books that publishers have donated to me. They’re ARCs that I've won in giveaways, all sorts of different things, books that I get just really cheap from when I do events. I'll take donations, monetary donations, and buy books from discount sites online. But I will give away these books. I've done quite a few pride events where I gave away all LGBTQIA+ books.

I go to little free libraries and I put all sorts of different types of books in little free libraries. I'll go to a different town every weekend, like Springfield one weekend, and Peoria another, and Decatur another. And doing that just refuels me to be able to get through the next week because it just it makes me happy to be able to spread that book joy and that book love and have that frontline experience.

I did a lot of third Friday events this summer in our county seat here in Logan County, and parents would express concerns like my kid only reads graphic novels, right? Is that really okay? And I would talk to them about the brain science and that it really is wonderful for them and how much visual literacy is important in our modern society. And to be able to see a little bit of that anxiety in that parent go away because they can back it up with real reasons why it's okay for their kid to read graphic novels and they're not behind, they're not cheating, they're not faking. It is wonderful and seeing the kids eyes light up whenever they pick out a new book.

I try to do books for all ages, so even though they're like, you should get a book to their child, they're like looking and they're like, there's also books for me. And it's absolutely one of the most wonderful things I call my little organization, and it's just me, but I call it BookHarts, HARTS because I’m from Hartsburg. And so it is so much fun.

Janette: I love that.

Leah: And I love, I want to re-underline this, reading graphic novels is reading, listening to audiobooks is reading, listening to someone else read is reading. Okay, there we go. I have to get off my soapbox.

Janette: Yeah, I know we're like, probably preaching to the choir, right? But it is literally one of those things where, you know, the fact that we have to talk about how all forms of reading are reading. And like my previous past life, like I have a master's degree in audiology. So learning about all the language development and like you talk about the brain science and literally the way that people learn and process and develop language and literacy is like, well, and it's fascinating. That's the really nerdy part of me coming out.

But also like, I mean, you're absolutely right. Like you have to talk about all the different parts of your brain that are engaged. And I hate how much judgment there is around reading, you know, and we've moved well past the like any book is a good book as long as your kid is reading a book, right. Now, it's what kind of books are your kids, right. And like the people who turn their nose up at manga and stuff like that, I just don't understand.

Leah: Yeah, that's my pet peeve. We could talk about that for a whole episode too.

Janette: Another episode, right? Yeah. Well, I want to thank Nichole for joining us today to share your, all of your experience and expertise. We really appreciate it. And to all the fantastic school librarians who sent in their own programming ideas and their suggestions. I do want to note that we're going to be taking a brief podcast break for the month of December. There will be no new episode. You'll have to tune back in in January when we'll kick off the New Year.

Leah, Ola, it's always a pleasure to spend this time with you talking about school libraries. To all of you out there, thanks for listening. And until next time, stay legit, don’t quit.