

Can't Shelve This

Episode 1: You Can Totally Sit With Us

Janette: Hi, welcome 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 co-host Leah Gregory.

Leah: Hi, everyone.

Janette: And our podcast producer, Ola Gronski.

Ola: Hello.

Janette: We're so glad that you're here for our very first episode and we're excited to bring you lots of great information about school libraries. Since we are new here, you might be wondering who even are we and why are we even talking about school libraries? So we thought we'd kick things off by sharing a little bit about ourselves and our why for teaming up for this podcast. Leah, do you want to introduce yourself first?

Leah: Sure. I am a former school librarian, but before I had that job, I had a bunch of different jobs. It took me a really long time to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up. So I bounced around and I was a customer service rep, I was a legal secretary, I was a preschool teacher. And then I went back and decided to get my library degree at a later age, which I will not reveal. And then after I got my library degree, I decided I wanted to be a school librarian. And to my horror, I realized I was not qualified to do that yet. I also had to get a teaching certificate.

So I went and got a separate teaching certificate. And then I was glad about that because I was thinking, I will never find a job as a school librarian because they're difficult to find sometimes and I'll teach for a while first. But I lucked out and got a job as a middle school librarian, and I worked there almost 15 years before I came to work for the Illinois Heartland Library System, and that's what I've been doing since 2022 and that's where I met Janette.

Janette: Right. So, I'll tell you a little bit about myself. One of the things Leah and I have in common is our late to librarianship career moves. So I am also a second-career librarian. My first career path was clinical audiology. So if you'd like to talk about ears, hearing or assistive listening devices, I am your girl. It's still something I'm really interested in.

But seriously, you know, like in my late thirties, early forties, I'll go ahead and give you my age. I don't really care, I guess, but I was kind of planning returning to audiology as a career, but I really wasn't sure what I wanted to be when I grew up. So a friend of mine asked me, you know, what is it about audiology that you like the most? Like, why would you be going back to that? And I really thought about it for a long time, honestly. And I think the thing I liked the most was just helping my patients and to connect them to the services that they

needed, right. So whether that's, you know, finding a provider or the care they need or the information that they needed, that's what I was passionate about.

So I really went into librarianship with the full intention of becoming some kind of a health services librarian or consumer health librarian, even because health information literacy is still something I'm really interested in. But, so I did decide to go back and get my master's degree in library information science as well. I went to Rutgers University and I was really fortunate to have some great professors there who introduced me to a lot of different areas, one of them being data science. So it's something I had been kind of dabbling in on and off over time. You know, just being in a health profession, you're connected to data in some way anyway, but I kind of strayed from my desire to stick with the health information literacy and got, had probably a little stronger interest in data while I was there. And after I graduated, I was able to stay with working in a research project with one of my professors, Dr. Anselm Spoerri. He was super great, loved my time working with him. And then shortly after that project ended, I joined the Reaching Across Illinois Library System as part of their school library data project.

So while I don't have Leah's background working in a school library, I do like to share that I have worked in school libraries. I've just never been paid for it. I have a lot of volunteer time doing things like circulation, shelving, cataloging, even weeding under the direction of the library information specialists that were working in those schools, so.

I'm happy to have that experience, which ties in well to the school library data project, which now at RAILS is known as the SLATE Project. It began as like a very short term project to collect information about school libraries as part of like understanding better how that profession is evolving. Is there a shortage of school librarians? What's happening? You know, why are they disappearing from the schools in Illinois? And really, it's grown into this advocacy initiative and an education initiative. So trying to help spread awareness about what the work of school librarians is. So I have a great interest in school libraries connected to that project. And like Leah mentioned, it kind of led us to, you know, working together in a lot of ways. She joined Illinois Heartland Library System at the same time that I was joining RAILS. And our work really dovetailed well together, don't you think?

Leah: I think so, yes. And I remember our first meeting together was, I think in January of 2022, and they were introducing you and telling me what you did. And I was making, I'm like, "must talk to her later." So I wrote myself a little note and we really just clicked both professionally and personally. So that's a lot. Both of those reasons are why we're here today, because we have a lot of things in common and a lot of the ideas about school libraries and a lot of the worries about school libraries we share.

Janette: Yeah, Leah is almost always my first phone call when I have something, a question I need to ask or some kind of a problem I've come across or an issue that a school librarian has shared with me because she's a great resource. So I wouldn't say that we make up reasons to work together, but I'm not going to say we don't make reasons to work together

because we really do enjoy working together and learning from each other. And I think that that's something that we're hoping to bring to this podcast too. We have also realized that we have a—

Leah: —a weird amount of things in common, so we each have a daughter named Olivia. We each have a cat named Quincy. Now that's only two, and now suddenly I'm blanking. I can't think of any others.

Janette: No, I mean, I think we both kind of grew up in, I mean, I grew up partly near Chicago, but then also, like, I think by the time we were in high school, we were living fairly close together and we just didn't know it.

Leah: Yes, Central Illinois.

Janette: You know, we both joined our library systems around the same time. We both have a lot of the same interests. We like a lot of the same types of books. I don't know if we want to go into our reading preferences just yet.

Leah: Well, I can talk—

Janette: Are we brave enough to do that?

Leah: I subscribe to no shame when it comes to reading

Janette: All right.

Leah: And the reason why, I value Janette for many reasons, and I value her friendship for many reasons. But one of the main reasons is that I can tell her that I'm reading romance and she does not roll her eyes. So I'm a big romance reader. I like other genres too. I will read almost anything, but my workplace seems to be focused on a group of people who read like heavy fantasy or horror and those are not my thing. So they're always reading these huge tomes. And I'm like, I read *Red, White & Royal Blue*.

Janette: I love that book, by the way.

Leah: I do love that book too.

Janette: And I saw they're making a sequel to the movie.

Leah: Oh, they are.

Janette: Yes, and they have their original cast, like it's about the same character. So that's going to be really great.

Leah: Yeah, I love the movie, too. I have to admit.

Janette: If you haven't read *Red, White & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, I very much recommend it. I do also read romance. I started reading romance at a very early age, honestly. Everybody is always like, how did you get into this? I'm like, well I read *Sweet Valley High* as a junior high schooler So that was like my gateway into the romance genre.

Leah: Did you read *Sweet Dreams*? Do you remember *Sweet Dreams* romances?

Janette: I don't know, no, I don't think so.

Leah: Oh, okay.

Janette: I had like, Harlequin Teen and things like that. Like, do you remember with the, I'm sorry, now I'm, this is kind of shady towards Harlequin Teen, but, like, they had these cheesy romance covers and I happened to remember this, it was like a girl standing with a guy next to a horse. And I was like, oh, a horse romance, I apparently wanted to read that, so. I can't even remember the title now. I wish I could, but—

Leah: We're going to have to go look it up on one of those—

Janette: I know, right?

Leah: —lost books.

Janette: You know, the cover will be out there somewhere on the Internet, right?

Leah: Yeah.

Janette: Thank God for the Internet, but, yeah, so I mean, I read, I also will read just about everything. I will read nonfiction. I mean, a lot of times just for work, right. But also, like, just out of interest. But I do tend to gravitate towards romance or historical fiction.

Leah: I read a lot of those, too, but my nonfiction interests tend towards true crime and serial killers. So if you're not afraid of me yet, you will be now.

Janette: I don't, I think those are interesting. Like I once read, it was actually a romance duet of basically a detective, and he was investigating a serial killer. I was terrified by that. Like I could read Stephen King as a teenager and I was fine. But apparently this, like, getting into the mind of someone who thinks that way, that, like, pathological mindset. And I don't know what it takes for authors to write things like that. It's got to be really difficult. But it was just, yeah, I was terrified by those books.

But anyway, I want to talk a little bit about the organizations that we work for. I want to know if you want to take a crack at describing what a regional library system is, because I think a lot of people don't really understand the type of organization that we work for. It's not something that is found in every state.

Leah: So it was described to me when I was hired as a quasi-governmental, I've also heard it called sub-state governmental agency, that reports essentially to the Illinois State Library. There's two of us.

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There are two multi-type systems in Illinois, and we are focused on supporting libraries. And there's a lot of different things that go into that.

Janette: I want to make the distinction between, like, Leah and I work for sister systems. So I work for the system that covers northern and west-central Illinois, and then her system covers east-central and southern Illinois. So everyone's covered in some way, shape, or form by one of these regional library systems. There's a third system, that is the Chicago Public Library. But it's not, as Leah mentioned, it's not a multi-type system. It's just a public library system. They are overseeing the 81 branches of the Chicago Public Library, soon to be 82, I believe, so.

Leah: Wow.

Janette: You know, technically there's three library systems in Illinois. We do tend to talk or pair up the two multi-type systems and we're supporting libraries that are public libraries, school libraries, academic libraries, and special libraries through delivery services, which is, you know what people I think commonly call interlibrary loan, right?

Leah: It's also called resource sharing.

Janette: I mean, because it is more than just books and materials from libraries, right? It's online resources. It's a lot of different things. The support is also brokering services like consulting services. We do a lot of continuing education. I think that for both of our systems, that's a really big focus, right? Because we want to make sure that our members have exactly what they need and the education and training, because this is, librarianship isn't a stagnant field, right? It's always changing. And we're always learning new things about information and the technology that we use to deliver our services at the local level. So I think the more that we can do as a system to kind of help guide that. And then also like, you know, you mentioned the Illinois State Library, which in Illinois is a division of the secretary of state's office. So there's a lot of legislative impact on libraries, too. And I think the systems also provide a lot of that guidance and support, which is really important.

Leah: And the most important thing that I do in my job and I know it's very important in your job and to both of our organizations as a whole, is advocacy. And that is kind of why we're

here today. That's, I think, what brings us together, because we are very passionate about advocacy for libraries in general and school libraries in particular. And it kind of surprised me when I was hired for this job. This job had not existed before, and they said basically I could make it what I wanted. And I had visions of helping school librarians, you know, find lesson plans or come up with behavior management methods. But I did not expect to dive in so deeply into advocacy, nor did I expect and I was ignorant of how dire the need for advocacy in Illinois was for school libraries. So that's an important thing that I want to make sure that everybody knows that we're doing, because I know it's lonely as a school librarian.

Janette: It really can be. And I think that's an important point to make, right? A lot of what we do is outreach and advocacy and so that we can connect people with the support and the resources they need, but also understanding the work that's going on at the local level. We can't do the work that we do without understanding what librarians are doing and what they're facing. And I do think that our increase in advocacy efforts, especially like, for me through the project I work on, SLATE, has a lot to do with, you know, you're seeing kind of this increased rise in intellectual freedom challenges, book bans and things like that. So to me, I looked at my project as, this is a way for people to have an understanding of, you know, what's the baseline level of librarianship that's out there? What are, how are schools being staffed? Who are the professionals that are providing readers' advisory and doing those types of things in schools and providing services? And what's the education and training and how do you help people understand that that's something that's necessary? Like you don't have to worry maybe nearly as much about collection development or what materials are being placed in your school library if you know that you have a trained professional in there making decisions and choosing things for the students in that school and the staff members, let's not leave them out. But I think it's important to understand that.

So that became an, a huge advocacy point for me in trying to understand, you know, what are school districts attempting to do with the staff that they have? Like, is there a shortage of school librarians? You know, are people just not interested in it as a profession? Is there not a need for it? Is it really evolving? You know, there's always this belief that school librarians are going to be replaced by Google, like you don't need a school librarian if you can do an Internet search. But I mean, as librarians, we obviously know that that's not true. There are a lot of other things that we do, and the information you find on the Internet isn't always the best information, but librarians are trained to spot that. They're trained to understand, you know, how to vet resources and things like that, something which I think we're seeing a lot of struggle with just in society in general, right?

So I think that for us, yeah, the advocacy piece has gotten to be a very large part of that. And then the education is kind of a natural offshoot, right? So getting in front of even school librarians, help them better understand how to advocate for themselves. But also teaching school boards and school administrators about the work that they're doing.

Leah: I like to tell everyone that Janette and I take our data show on the road. We like to, we both are kind of data nerds. I hate to say it that way, but we're like, this interesting piece of data, it's so fascinating. And then we like to take it and get it in front of the school librarians by doing continuing education presentations or conference presentations. I've been invited to a county institute for all the librarians in a single county on Institute Day. I'm so excited about it because any time I can get this message in front of school librarians, you have to track what you do, you have to be able to say how many students you serve. You have to show the value of your library on a moment's notice. And so it's very important to me to make sure that we can collect all the data that we want and we can put it in front of all the higher-level people that we want if we can get in touch with them. But I feel like real advocacy has to start with the people, you know, in the schools doing the job.

Ola: Speaking of that, Leah, your guys' interest in data, is there any particular piece of information that you've found the most interesting or shocking when it comes to school libraries?

Leah: There's actually two pieces of data that I have found out through my association with Janette and the SLATE project that I find shocking. And the first one is that there are more than 300 job titles in the state of Illinois for school librarians. There is no continuity. There's no understanding or explanation for what those job titles mean. It's just whatever the school decides to call the person that they stick in the library. The second and most shocking and this is, this I was learning before we started really truly collecting data just from being out and talking to librarians, but I find it shocking that a lot of school libraries, a good percentage, their only budget is the state grant that comes in, we used to call the per capita grant and or a book fair. There's no money allocated from the school district for their libraries.

Janette: I initially was thinking I didn't know if I could come up with a good fact or a piece of data that was shocking to me. But I will say probably the thing that has been most shocking to me in all the data that I've collected and analyzed is to learn that there is, in the state of Illinois, a singular librarian who's responsible for 12 school buildings. Like that, to me, is just like mind-blowing. You know, there's always been this kind of belief that you have a school library, you have a librarian, it's like a one to one. And I do appreciate the fact that that has evolved to a greater understanding of, like, the number of students in your school should really determine the number of staff members, like student to teacher ratios apply to the library, just like they apply to the classroom. So that's definitely an evolution over the decades, right, of how school librarianship has changed and the understanding of that profession. But to oversee the work and function of 12 libraries is just more than any one person should really have to do.

That's actually a good segue into talking about the start of this podcast, because we kind of began with the idea of having this podcast as a way for librarians to share their stories. I was, had a long conversation with a school librarian who used to work in Leah's system, and she was talking about her work overseeing seven school buildings, right, and how she

just really felt defeated and like she wasn't doing a good job and she was frustrated and she was her description was that she was doing kind of the bare minimum to meet the needs in that district. And that she wasn't really teaching a lot of literacy skills. It was really just get books on shelves, you know, order things, weed, and trying to like upkeep the collection. So she was really only able to, she felt, adequately do a very small part of what school librarians do. So, you know, over the course of the last two years, a couple of different times we've said, you know, oh, that's a great idea for the podcast, save that for the podcast. And it was kind of this running joke, right?

Leah: We were never going to have a podcast.

Janette: And now here we are with this podcast.

Leah: And we were safe saying that, right? But then, then we decided, okay, one day we got serious.

Janette: One day, well no, one day I joked about it with Ola, and that's how it came about.

Leah: Oh, that's right. It's all Ola's fault.

Janette: Because, yeah, let's blame it on her. But it was one of those things where I said, oh, Leah and I have this running joke about having a podcast, and she said, oh, you should totally do that. And I was like, for real?

Ola: I think it's important for us to like, provide a space for school librarians to, yes, of course, get information. Like, that's so much of our job at these sister systems is matching our members with important information to help them do their jobs well. But I want us to provide a space for school librarians to not only get that information, but feel seen, and maybe laugh a little bit, and be able to listen to this yes, maybe to help you for work, but also just to help you in your everyday life and feel understood as a school librarian and make the job maybe a little more fun when times are tough. Plus, like, who doesn't love a podcast?

Leah: I'm obsessed with podcasts. There, I'll admit it.

Janette: I do love a good podcast. I will say, though, that I'm only like a loyal listener to certain podcasts, and I'm going to totally out myself and age myself, but I will say that "Fake Doctors, Real Friends" is one of my very favorite podcasts. So that's the guys from *Scrubs*, Donald Faison and Zach Braff. So, love them. Loved that show, too. So, I don't know. Do you have a favorite podcast, Leah?

Leah: We're going back to my serial killer obsession. But no, I love true crime podcasts. I love *Crime Junkie*, it's a good one.

Janette: That's a good one.

Leah: I like to listen to *Dateline* and, here, I'll age myself, I can watch *Dateline* on my streaming service. I have some subscription that allows me to watch *Dateline*, but I don't watch *Dateline* because my husband and I are at the age where we'd like to have the subtitles on all the time. So for various reasons, my husband actually does have a hearing disability, but it's also easier, it's like, I don't know, we've just gotten into this habit. So now I like it. And *Dateline*'s subtitles are out of sync and it drives me insane. So there's like, a little weird thing about me that you know now that, like, I cannot stand when subtitles are out of sync.

Janette: Interesting fact, checked off.

Leah: I listen to *Dateline* podcasts.

Janette: That's very cool. Yeah. So I think Ola did a great job of like summarizing why we decided to go ahead and explore what this podcast could be, and we're excited about a lot of different opportunities. It's a little bit overwhelming to think about all the great things we can talk about with school libraries, right? Some of the good things in schools that I want to really spotlight is, you know, really I mean, I guess obviously shining a light on librarians themselves and the work that they're doing. They're doing so much for literacy. They're doing a lot for, you know, staff development and just the kind of support that they provide in the schools that they serve. There's a lot of really good work happening there. Do you have anything you want to share from the libraries that you've visited?

Leah: One of the favorite parts of my job, one of my favorite parts of my job is the fact that I get to go out and meet librarians in their libraries and see what they're doing. And I cannot tell you how proud they are to have me come to their library and see what they're doing. And then they always apologize like their space is too small and they don't have a budget. And some of the books are old, but it doesn't matter because they're determined to provide the very best library service that they can to their kids. And it's so, I have seen so many things. I have seen librarians who singlehandedly get like whole special ed classes reading, and I have seen librarians take a bunch of kids who maybe didn't get along with everybody, and they formed like a little band in the library at lunchtime because the librarian loves music and he had instruments out that he was glad to let the students try. I've seen the library just be a safe space at lunch time for the kids who don't want to go into that huge lunchroom because they're kind of a loner. They don't have a lot of friends. They don't feel safe sitting there by themselves. So they sign up to come to have lunch in the library. And sometimes people don't realize that the library is a safe space. And that's why I think so many librarians are trying to make it. We used to have like a bingo slash dance party for a quarterly reward, so if everybody met their positive behavior goals, they would have these two huge parties. One was like a bingo game and one was a dance in the school library. But there are kids who earned the reward, who found either a screaming bingo game or a dance equally abhorrent and did not want to go to either. And honestly, they just wanted to go read

for half an hour by themselves. So we would open up the library. If you want just a quiet space to hang out, come on in here. So I'm always awed and amazed by what everybody's doing in their libraries, but I am equally despondent about the fact that in their own buildings, not everyone seems to recognize it.

Janette: That's true. Like, I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about the work of school librarians, right? Like all the challenges that they face and the things that they are doing right, you know, whether you realize it or not, your school librarian is there to help increase diversity and exposure and awareness to different cultures and interests and ideas through the collection that they're curating. Right. So, you know, understanding that and then the curriculum support, right? Providing the materials that support all the learning that takes place, a resource for staff members like the collaboration and that opportunity. And, you know, I used to talk to my, when my kids, my kids are all grown now again, I'm aging myself, but when they were in elementary school, I did spend a lot of time volunteering in their school library and talking with their media specialist. And, you know, she would always say, well, everyone thinks I have it easy. Like I can just sit around and read books. And I was like, she did do a fair amount of reading, but she was reading books at home just the same as teachers grade papers at home, they were for the students. Like, it wasn't leisure reading for her. She wasn't picking up, you know, the newest Emily Henry. She was reading, you know, *Junie B. Jones* and, you know, so that she could book talk it the next day. Right? So it's, there's a lot of that that goes on behind the scenes that I think people don't really understand.

Leah: I always look at it this way, and this is like a double edged sword. I always say to them, if you have a school librarian and all they are doing is checking books in and out, you're paying a premium and you're not getting the services. Librarians are teachers first and foremost, certified school librarians are teachers first and foremost. And then they're like, well, okay, we can get rid of the librarian and just have a checkout clerk. That's not the message I'm sending. The message I'm sending is that you have this amazing tool in your building to do these great things.

I remember a teacher came to me once, we had a boy. He was like, I just don't like to read and blah, blah, blah. I hate it. And I always have said, if you hate to read, you don't hate to read, you just haven't found the right book. And I was like, well, what do you like? And I learned this, they couldn't tell me what books they like because, like, they had never liked a book, right? So I'm like, well what do you like? And he's like, I love comedy. I think comedy is, so then I'm like, okay, I have to find this kid this funny book. So I found him a book, and I don't know if you want me to mention, I guess I can mention it because it was like a secret weapon. It was *The Big Splash* by Jack Ferraiolo. It's a hard last name.

Janette: Secret weapon, you heard it here first.

Leah: Yes, and he loved it. And he then was like, oh my gosh, books can be great. And so the teacher comes back to me. She's like, oh my gosh, you fixed him. And I'm like, well, first of

all, he wasn't broken. But second of all, it can be that clear cut and obvious. Oftentimes it isn't. Many times it's years and years of working on somebody, you know, to get to know them. But you have this amazing secret weapon that can increase your reading scores and help your social emotional learning, because that's a big buzz word right now. And you have this great resource that can provide professional development for your teachers. And you know what? If you are going back for additional education hours, you have a great resource that can help you find information that you need. I cannot tell you how many teachers I helped get their master's degrees. So if you have a school librarian and you're not seeing this kind of output from them, I would urge you to check and see if their workload is manageable. Because if you've got them checking out, like one person checking out books for 2,000 kids, obviously they don't have time to do these amazing, I would almost call it magic. I would.

Janette: Well, and that goes back to the whole data thing, right? Like, because here's me always trying to drag data back into the conversation. But you know, one of the things I talk about with school librarians is understanding your schedule and blocking out the time that it takes just to do your regular library tasks. Right? Like so acquisitions, weeding, you know, any kind of collection management, all of that type of stuff that you've got to do. And then how much time is left to do the rest of it, right? Like how much time is left for teaching? How much time is left for collaboration? And like, if you look at your schedule and if you're only part time, like doing all of that in half the hours is really going to be challenging, right? And you're not going to have enough time, or to your point, when you're serving too many students and you don't have those helping hands, there's no way you can be circulating books all day long if you're in a school over a thousand students easily.

Leah: Easily, easily. And then somebody has to check them in and put them back on the shelf, which is the part they always forget about.

Janette: Right. I will say that that's probably in my experience, that was the best use of student volunteers was shelving because not only did they learn how to use the library, but they're like, they feel useful and, you know, they're very good at shelving. Organization is a skill that they excel at, so.

Leah: And they can learn it. It's pretty, it's like one of those things you can learn pretty quickly and then they have some ownership. So like, if they're in the library with their class, I'm like, oh hey, can you show them where the books by Mike Lupica are, for example? And they're like, oh, come with me.

Janette: And I always loved like the kids who thought that they were like getting the behind the scenes look at like how the real library works. And it was like, okay, yeah, this is like, you know, library after dark kind of thing. So yeah, it was very interesting. But what was your experience in your own school library growing up?

Leah: This is so funny because I have zero recollection of setting foot in a school library my entire life.

Janette: Oh, no.

Leah: So I was a public library kid. Like my grandfather took me to the public library every single Saturday of my life. And that was a big deal because I came from a very small town in Missouri. So when we moved to a larger city in central Illinois, Decatur, Illinois, I was blown away by the public library because my little town did have a library, but it was a little two-room library. I remember like feeling like, I'm sure this is not true, but I felt like I had read every single book in the kids section. And then when I got to high school, I joke because I visit that high school now because it's in my territory. So I've been to that high school and I've been in the library. And I have to admit that when I was in high school, I never set foot in that library. We did, so I'm dating myself again here. When we did research for school, we went as a group to the public library and we got down the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and we made the reference librarian's day miserable by requesting journal after journal after journal to come, that she would have to go back and get for us. And then we would take notes on notecards and then we would take them home and put them in an outline and then we would type it with an electric typewriter. So that's how old I am. So I didn't do research at school and I didn't, by the time I was in high school, I didn't go to the public library as often either. I was just, I worked and I had spending money and I spent it all on books. So I did like buy a ton of books. So I am not one of those people who's like, oh, a school library changed my life.

Ola: I will chime in and say that I was thinking about this yesterday. What was like my earliest school library memory? And I have this vivid memory in elementary school of, I mean, I've always been a voracious reader since I was little. And so I suppose my reading level was a little bit higher than most kids in my grade. And I have this memory of going to the school library with my class. And the teacher saw me walking over to essentially like the bigger chapter books probably maybe more for middle school. And she's like, no, no, no, you can't read that. Like, that's, like she just didn't understand. And I remember the librarian stepping in because she knew me saying like, no, Ola can read these books, like I know what she's capable of. And I remember it was called *Camp Confidential*. It was like a summer camp book. There was like pink camo on the cover, and it was just like a little fun series about girl life. Like early chick lit. I essentially think it's early chick lit. This is where—

Janette: That was your gateway.

Ola: —it all started for me. Yeah.

Leah: We forgot to ask what you like to read now.

Ola: Oh my God, Leah. I was nodding my head with you. I'm a thriller girlie. I read thrillers. A lot of true crime as well. But then on the other side of the spectrum, also a lot of romance

and chick lit. Dabbling in a little horror right now. But I'm still trying to find like, the right kind for myself, but.

Janette: I will say like my experience in my elementary school library. My school librarian probably changed the trajectory of my love of reading, right? Like, I probably, I'm not going to say that I'm going to attribute it all to her, but I definitely, you know, shout out to Alice Ziller at Booth Central School in Wilmington. But she took a lot of time with me because I had a similar experience to Ola where it was, you know, I was reading beyond what I was supposed to be reading, and it was kind of like, what do you do with this kid? We don't know what to do. She's going to get bored. She should be reading something. And she spent a lot of time figuring out what I liked, what I didn't like, and really steering me in the right direction. And then I got into the like, my family has a background of, like, athletics and like being very competitive. You would never know that by meeting me now. But you know, my, we were all athletes growing up and so—

Leah: I was a dancer growing up. So, yeah.

Janette: There you go. Okay, so.

Leah: Left that behind.

Janette: Very competitive, but still, like I think my love of competition kind of started okay, not just Little League softball, but also like Battle of the Books, like which I think a lot of schools still do now. Right? So being on that team and reading through all the books on the list and memorizing all the facts and doing all of those things. So I kind of like moved from just using primarily the school library into really also using the public library, because I couldn't find all the books I needed when I needed them. Other kids were also trying to read them at the same time right. So getting those from the public library, some of them, my first experience with interlibrary loan I remember, was when I was in elementary school because my library didn't have this book. I was devastated and they were like, but we can get it for you from another library. And I was like, you can? So talk about, you know, like the library magic, right? I was like, how does that work? So yeah, it's been like I definitely remember all of that.

But I had a similar kind of experience to you, Leah, as I got older. A lot of the research stuff that I had to do for high school, I was not doing it at my high school library. Like I might start there looking for just like ideas or topics and things like that. But I was fortunate to also live in central Illinois, close to Illinois State University, so I was able to use the Milner Library quite a bit for research and we thought it was great because they had computers and they had all these other fancy things that we didn't have, so.

Yeah, that was, you know, a lot of my experience, but also like the notecards cards and the researching, it's just so different now. And, you know, we didn't have those visual graphic organizer tools that you have now and all of the literacy tools.

Leah: And the citation tools right inside your word processor.

Janette: Yeah.

Leah: Do you remember having to save room at the bottom of your typed page for footnotes and then forgetting to do it and then having to start over?

Janette: I do, yes I remember that. But I also remember like, you know, okay, so when we were learning research skills, it was you would put your facts and citations like on a note card, right? And then you would also include the information for the bibliography on the note card, but also whatever information you wanted to include in your paper. I also remember, like my stack of note cards falling on the floor, and I hadn't numbered them. So that was also fun. Like, that's a terrible memory of researching. So anyway.

Leah: So despite all the magical things that you and I both have seen in this job, there are some downsides. And I think it's important that we talk about some of the bad things that we're seeing, some of the negatives in the school library world.

Janette: Right. I agree. I think that I'll probably start with funding. That's like the number one thing that I feel like is kind of a negative thing happening in school libraries right now. Like you see the decrease in the number of staff members that they're hiring. So, you know, you have funding for personnel, but then you also funding for like materials and resources, right? Like the number of school librarians I talk to who say that their budgets are getting cut year over year over year. And I understand that education funding is very difficult in general. You know, like there's federal programs that, you know, wax and wane, so you get money that comes in and then those programs end. And it's hard for education administrators to really fund a student experience sometimes. But I think one of the things in this, I'll connect it back data again is that, you know, really understanding the value of school librarians in the overall education experience is one way that hopefully we can change that and increase the funding that goes to school libraries.

Leah: One of the bad things that I'm seeing is kind of the lack and you talked about this a little bit, the lack of respect for the position of the librarian in the overall school culture. So, so many administrators believe that a library is just checking books in and out, and that is not the case. I don't understand why they believe that unless they've never had a library experience themselves or unless they've had a negative library experience, which we can talk about a little bit, there are people who are like, I'm not going to the library because somebody made me feel stupid once when I was in one. I am so disheartened and, even the school that I came from, we had an administrator who's like, libraries are going to be gone. It's going to be all digital. And basically the library is a giant waste of space. And I was lucky that I had a huge, deep relationship with the teachers who are like, oh no, that is not our library. Our library is extremely important. But if you're a school librarian who has not

been given the time or opportunity to develop those collaborative relationships, you may not have that support. And if your administration doesn't support you, then you start to feel undervalued, underused, disrespected, and you start to see yourself as the first on the chopping block. And we've talked about this before, about how librarians and schools are frequently one of the first things to get cut if cuts become necessary.

Janette: Yeah, I mean, I think that that's part of the battle for sure is, you know, and that ties back to the advocacy and the increased need for that, you know, to combat this whole like being on the verge of being eliminated. Right. Or how useful are you or how necessary are you? And then talking about, like a lot of times, especially elementary schools, the library is sometimes the largest space in the school, right? So if they're having a big program, they take over the library. If, you know, one of my favorite stories is the school librarian I spoke to who was a high school librarian, talking about how during AP testing, her library is shut down for a month. Like that's all that happens in the library for a month. And she's like, there's really nowhere else to have it because it's a very large space and I understand it is a functional part of the school and it needs to function in that way sometimes. But also like, man lost opportunity or, you know, students who can't access books to read and things like that that, you know, kids are just going to go for a month without those resources. Or you talked earlier about like safe space and things like that. You know, if that's your safe space as a teenager, where do you go for that month when it's taken away?

Leah: Honestly, I always say like if those kids don't have a safe place to go when they're at school, they're not going to come to school. I have seen so many kids and, I think anxiety is rampant in our society today, but the number of anxious kids that are in school every day is just amazing to me. Like and not in a good way. I'm just like, oh these poor kids are under so much stress. If they cannot find a place to come down from that anxiety, then the next thing they're going to do is start not coming to school. So that's a very important, I always like, I will die on this hill. It is so important to have that quiet, safe space in libraries. I mean, there's other places that provide that in the school, frequently the counselor's office or something else, but. I think school libraries get co-opted a lot of the time to be other things.

And we've seen that, especially with the teacher shortage and the lack of substitute teachers, because frequently school librarians are certified in other areas. I was certified K-8 like general, like self-contained education. And so if there was no subs available, there were no subs available, then I would get pulled. And there were during the pandemic and when we were first coming back and we were quarantining everybody for ten days automatically if they tested positive, I was almost never in the library because I was subbing. And then when I went back to the library, I found that in my absence it had become the de facto like in-school suspension office because it was convenient to the dean of students. And if they didn't actually want to suspend somebody, but they kind of wanted to remove them from the class for the day, they're just going in the library. And I wasn't necessarily in there. There was not necessarily anybody in there if I was subbing. And so they had no supervision. Nobody knew where they were. There were so many problems with this. And I will argue at length about how school libraries should not be used

for punishment in any way, because there has got to be a positive association with the library and with literacy. If you automatically send kids who are struggling in school to the library for punishment, you're never going to get them to come in to get a book. So I'll get off that soapbox.

Janette: No, I 100% agree. I mean, libraries are one of the very few places in a school that are not off-limits to everyone. Right? Like everyone has access to it and everyone has a right to be there. So like, how many places in a school are welcoming in that way? You know, and that a kid can feel at home and make a space there for themselves. And I think that is really important. You know, like what you've been talking about all along with the belonging and just, you know, having access to an adult, who oftentimes is a sounding board or a resource or, you know, a place for kids to go as a safe person to talk to sometimes, so.

Leah: And librarians have a little bit of an advantage. And I always said that, like some of the kids that drove the other teachers insane, I would love those kids, but it was so much easier for me because I wasn't making them do anything they didn't want to do, usually. I was like, hey, you can be here, you can, you can read, or you can not read. You can't be disruptive. But I'm not going to make you write a six-page paper, I'm not going to make you stop doing you know, I'm not going to make you stop and pay attention to math, which you hate, you know? So I feel that librarians are kind of in a unique position, like school counselors, where, like, we're not usually punishing you. We're not usually demanding things of students. We have a great opportunity to be that adult that is just there like, let me help you, so.

Janette: I want to go back to something you were talking about earlier, about like people's perceptions or the idea of what a school librarian is or undermining their professionalism in some way. And I think that we would be remiss to not talk about the real obvious, like elephant in the room of book bans and book challenges as being a bad thing that happens in school libraries right now. But, you know, that to me is like the biggest way that you could disrespect a librarian's professional credentials and training is by suggesting that she doesn't know how to choose books or that she's, you know, allowing books that are inappropriate to her collection. So, or their collections, sorry, not all just women here. But I think that it's, you know, important to talk about how stressful that is, all the ways that that introduces not just, you know, this kind of attack on someone's personal training and integrity, but also sometimes their character.

Leah: Yes. And it makes librarians afraid for their jobs. It makes them afraid for their reputations. We talk about this quite frequently in our roles as advocates. Frequently they'll give up because the toll that it takes on them is not worth fighting for that one book. I was going to go back to, you know, the biggest way you can disrespect the librarians. So administrators, if you're listening, if a parent complains about a book, do not walk into the library and ask them to take it off the shelf or tell them to take it off the shelf. Come in and say, what can you tell me about this book? We've had a complaint. Let's have a discussion. That's the best way to handle it. Because if you're not behind your school librarian, that

opens up so many ways for, and I don't want to say members of the community, because very often these book bans are not initiated by members of the community. They're initiated by other special interest groups. But it really opens the door for some abusive practices, which we, you and I, have both seen multiple times. And that's not going away anytime soon.

Janette: Well, and I know we've both had the conversation about different situations that have arisen and, you know, school librarians who are just tired of fighting. They do sometimes choose not to challenge something, just like let it happen, because they've fought and fought and fought and they can't fight it anymore. Right. You know, there's only so much. You're just one person. There's only so many things you can do and you know, it is, it's your job, it's your life's work. And that's part of, you know, what makes librarians special, right? Is we, it's a service profession. We are there for the service of someone else other than ourselves. And, you know, doing that work is fulfilling. And to have someone constantly challenging it, I mean, it's inevitable that over time you're going to get tired. You're going to feel like you want to give up. So, you know, we're here to tell you, don't give up, you know, like we want to be part of what supports you and hopefully connect you with the people who can help provide that support as well.

Leah: Have you read much about vocational awe? Have you heard of that?

Janette: Yeah. Yeah.

Leah: There's an article about vocational awe and librarianship and I'm going to get this name butchered. It's Fobazi Ettarh I think, and it's a great article about how so many people expect librarians to really throw themselves, you know, into the fight for, you know, against book bans and censorship. But also we have families and sometimes we just want to go home at night, too. So it's, I do take my calling to serve children very seriously. But there is a limit and I think there is a limit for everybody. And everybody's limit is a little bit different. So sadly, we are getting pushed to our limits a lot more than ever before in school librarianship.

Janette: And I think that you're seeing a greater blurring of those lines between who you are as a person and who you are as a librarian more so than ever before. It's bleeding over into a lot of other areas of society as well. Like you see that same kind of social construct being created. But it's, you know, with librarianship, it's hard because just because I want to create a diverse collection and expose kids to ideas that maybe are different from their own or backgrounds and characters that are different from who they are, doesn't mean that I'm trying to change everyone, right? So it's you know, I do subscribe to the idea that it's good to learn about differences and like, I've always enjoyed learning those things. So hopefully, you know, school librarianship can kind of get back to where that's valued and not challenged quite as much. Talking about mental health and the importance in school libraries kind of brings us to the last segment of the podcast, which we're calling Shelf Care. So we feel like, because like I said, librarianship is a service profession and we have a

tendency to give a lot of ourselves in that line of work. We wanted to really spotlight mental health care and awareness in this space and to remember that taking care of yourself is essential to being able to do your job. You know, I, I like to use the battery analogy, which is like, don't deplete your battery. You know, you need to be able to recharge in order to keep going. And I think Leah has a bucket analogy that she always shares.

Leah: Yes, I always say actually, I don't say this, somebody else said it and I can't remember who, where I heard it. It's that you can't fill other people's buckets if your bucket is empty. And I think that's so important because you cannot keep giving. You have to replenish yourself is what I think I'm trying to say there.

Janette: So Shelf Care for us is going to be a time to openly and honestly discuss our challenges and then also how we're taking care of ourselves right now. I'm going to toss it back to Leah and ask you, I'll put you on the spot, you know, do you want to share one way that you're taking care of yourself right now?

Leah: So one way that I take care of myself is, and I am blessed by having amazing coworkers and not just in my organization, but people like you and Ola. So one of the ways that I really try not to let it bring me down is to get in touch with one of those people. Janette, and I remember calling Janette one day and I was really bummed out and I'm like, my boss is gone, all my coworkers are gone. So bingo, you win the lottery today because I am like, I was, I got devastating news and it was all, it was work related. I would also probably call you if it was devastating personal news, too. I'm like, I just need to talk to somebody. So that is one of the ways that I take care of myself is that I reach out and I am not ashamed to say like I am having a tough day or I am struggling here. I need like, somebody pick me up or something. So I frequently reach out to other people. I just so happen, and I have to shout out my work buddy Kate because she is so much fun, but she's the same way. She does not hesitate to reach out to me and say, like, I'm struggling and I'm having a hard day. Can you, can you help me? And I think that's important for school librarians. And you can talk about how you're taking care of yourself and then we'll talk about an important thing that I think that school librarians need to do for shelf care.

Janette: Okay. Yeah. I mean, I think that it's important to also realize that not everyone feels like they are comfortable doing that type of outreach. I mean, it is really great when you have those types of resources. And I will say I definitely lean on Leah the same way, right? Like something kind of, I mean, I texted her when she was on her family vacation because I had something I needed to talk about. So, and she was gracious enough to give me her time while she was waiting for the *Cars* ride at Disneyland. So, you know, they're, knowing those people, and it's great if you have them. But like I want to talk a little bit about for me, sometimes when I don't feel like I have things that I could share with someone else, or maybe I feel too vulnerable to share them because I think there is a little bit of pressure sometimes to have this professionalism. Like I, you know, I don't want people to think I'm less than or incapable if I share some kind of an insecurity. So, you know, for me, a lot of times, you know, the obvious thing is I'm going to read a book, right? I do like to lose myself

in books, but I also really, really rely on music. So music for me can be a game changer, a complete mood changer. It can be while I'm doing something else, I am a frequent like spite and anger cleaner, so my house will be very clean if I'm having a bad day.

Leah: I don't have that gift. I'm sorry. I wish.

Janette: Luckily, I'm not angry very often. Or I guess, unluckily I'm not angry very often. But you know, music is a big part of that. So like I will put on a playlist or even this morning, you know, getting ready for this podcast. I asked my coworkers what was their favorite hype music, right? So to help build me up and get me ready for, you know, to record this so music can really change my mood in a lot of ways. So I feel like that's a pretty easy thing. Most people have access to it, so I like that. What did you want to share?

Leah: I think we wanted to talk a little bit about how another main reason for this podcast that ties back to mental health, taking care of yourself and doing what you need to get through is we want to, first of all, share our connection to each other and the sister systems' connections to each other because we don't operate in a vacuum. But to acknowledge and recognize that school librarianship can be very lonely and that sometimes those connections are the only thing that get you through. So I value enormously my connection with you and Ola and doing this podcast. And I hope that school librarians who are listening and maybe some administrators who are listening, we can always hope and maybe even just some teachers who are listening or some public librarians realize, you know, this would probably be easier if I could reach out to somebody. And then we're going, I think, talk in another episode about some easy and good ways to make connections.

Janette: Yeah, that could definitely be a whole discussion on its own. I also want to share that I value our friendship and our collaboration. I know we talked about that earlier, about how we find excuses to work together, but I do definitely value that with you as well. So the sentiment is returned.

Leah: My joke when we present together is always that like her day job is the data specialist at RAILS, her night job is to be my friend, so. It's 24/7 with me.

Ola: Speaking of future topic ideas and things that we want to cover, if anyone listening has some ideas or wants to be a guest on our podcast and share their experience in their school libraries with whatever challenges or successes or just fun things that you want to share, please reach out to us. You can contact us at communications@railslibraries.org. Shoot us an email, give us feedback. We really want this to be a conversation with the school library community and not just us in our bubble.

Janette: Yeah, we definitely hope to hear from you, all of you who are listening today. Thanks so much for your time. Thanks for joining us. Leah Ola, as always, thanks for everything.

Leah: Thanks, everyone. We'll see you next time.