SPARKS Episode 20

DEIDRE BRENNAN: Welcome to the 20th episode of Sparks! I am Deirdre Brennan, the Executive Director of the Reaching Across Illinois Library System, or RAILS, and we started this podcast to spark conversation and debate, even, about issues that are affecting libraries of all types today. Our guests today are Katie McClain and Amanda Civitello from the Waukegan Public Library in Illinois. Katie is an Adult Reference Assistant and Amanda is the Marketing Manager and we're talking about a very important topic today: sexual harassment in libraries. Welcome Katie and Amanda.

AMANDA CIVITELLO: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

KATIE MCCLAIN: I’m glad to be here.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Maybe we'll start, if you don't mind, with one of you taking the lead and just describing the origin story of how you got involved in this. I know you were part of a conversation starter at ALA and then it continued at ILA and you’ve done a survey. Maybe you could just take us through the genesis and development of your work on this important topic.

KATIE MCCLAIN: I've been working at the Waukegan library for a little over seven years now and I distinctly remember the first time that something like sexual harassment happened to me from a patron, even though I didn't recognize it in the moment. A patron asked me just a regular library related question and then told me I would look really good with breast implants and continued to push the point. I was just so shocked that I didn't know what to say. At the time I thought, “Oh, well this is just part of the new job; I'm working with the public” but all of my co-workers said, “Oh my gosh, no, you should have had him removed from the library.” Then a few years later; these types of incidents were happening to me and were happening to my co-workers and we would talk about it amongst ourselves. But we hadn’t really brought it to anyone's attention until a couple of friends of mine, who did not work in a library, but I was telling them about some of the experiences that I was having at work and some of the frustrations and I mentioned that I was dressing differently coming into work (I didn't want to wear any kind of clothing that might call attention to me and encourage a patron to make an inappropriate comment, which of course is a problematic mind set anyway) but they said there's no reason to be putting up with this at all. They said you need to tell someone about this and I kind of had a revelation that night of how much this was affecting me. The next day I sent an email to my manager who had recently taken over our department. So, she'd only been there a few months but I sent her this email saying, “Look, I'm kind of at my breaking point here. This is what’s happening. We're talking about this amongst ourselves; we need to do something. I said I can't keep coming to work preparing for a fight every day or preparing for an encounter. It's just not healthy.” She responded immediately to the email and we had a long conversation in person the next day. She brought it to the attention of our administration at the time. They were shocked that this was going on and that sparked a series of roundtable discussions with other staff members we started to strengthen up security procedures. This was about four and a half years ago but this has kind of been a key issue for me, really, ever since then.

AMANDA CIVITELLO: In terms of how we got here today, where we’re speaking with you on this topic, Katie and I got on the subject of sexual harassment in June of last year when we were both participating in a public chat on twitter around this topic. Katie mentioned to me offline at work the next day that we had just recently had an incident at the library that she was going to let me know about. It related to a patron asking her for copies of one of our promotional posters of our shining new renovation that happened to have Katie sitting at the reference desk in a huge wide angle lens shot and the patron asked for a stack of glossies of it. My reaction was I can't believe that and let me immediately pull that signage. We're not going to have that up there if it's going to put you in an uncomfortable position relative to patrons. And it occurred to us that if we were in the same building, not talking about it, then it was time for us as a library to have this conversation but also us as a profession. So we submitted an application to be a conversation starter at the 2017 ALA Annual Convention. We were really excited that ALA’s members voted for us and selected us as one of the topics. After we presented at the ALA Annual Conference in June 2017, we were excited to do another version of this talk at ILA Annual Conference in October and followed it up with a presentation that really focused on frontline staff at the Reaching Forward Conference last May and we've done some in-person and webinar training since then, including one for RAILS!

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Thank you very much. Well, this is kind of amazing that this was happening and you're both in the same building and you didn't know it was happening. Can you tell us a little bit about what you heard from other people, either at the conferences or in your survey?

AMANDA CIVITELLO: One of the things that we did in preparation for our talk at ALA Annual was to survey as many respondents as we could manage before the conference began. We did that because we wanted to have an idea of what other library professionals were experiencing, based on the type of library and community they serve. We surveyed about 175 library professionals running the gamut from seasoned administrators, to brand new front line staff, to special librarians and school librarians. Many of the experiences that our survey respondents reported were things that either we had heard colleagues say to us or that members of our team had experienced and they really covered a spectrum. They included uncomfortable comments, physical contact, and things that really sounded more like stalking or targeting of a single library staff person.

KATIE MCCLAIN: The responses that we got from attendees who have sat in on our presentations, really it's sad that these experiences, no matter which library we talked to or which group of people we talked to (we’ve chatted with Librarians in Florida in North Carolina, New York, Tennessee) were all having the same experiences. It really drives home the need for a conversation like this but it's also can feel disheartening or a little sad at times to know that this is such a prevalent problem. However, that also means that the need to talk about it and need to address it proactively is-the time is way past for us to do that. That's why we're so happy that even though it's a difficult topic, we've had a lot of library professionals that have really responded to this.

AMANDA CIVITELLO: If we were going to look for a common thread, one of the most flaring things was that a lot of our survey respondents feel like they can’t report it at their library and their response to our survey or comments during our presentation were sometimes their first opportunities to share what happened to them.
DEIRDRE BRENNAN Did you say they feel like they can report it or they cannot report it?

AMANDA CIVITELLO: Felt they could not report it. So responding to our survey or speaking up at a conference was there first opportunity to share that.
DEIRDRE BRENNAN: But you had a good experience at your library with management, right? The management was very responsive and supportive?
KATIE MCCLAIN: The first thing that our Director and Assistant Directors at the time did in our first meeting was that they told us, without hesitation, that they would 150% back us up if we reported any of this type of behavior. They would support us and make sure that they weren't undermining us. They wanted to make sure that there was action taken, that we were okay, and that we felt safe. They had a wonderful response that, I think just that statement alone, empowered a lot of us to be able to stand up and address the situation in the moment or report it to our safety team or to the administration so that they could continue further action. Since then, we have basically an entirely new administration; we have a new Executive Director and the Assistant Director and this is still a topic that we continue to talk about a lot at this library.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Well, that is great and a role model for other libraries as well. So, have you made some specific changes to policies? I know you mentioned yo’ve beefed up security earlier but anything else that would be useful information for libraries who are beginning to deal with this?

AMANDA CIVITELLO: One of the most important things we’ve been trying to do is to continually make space for us to share these experiences at the library because in buildings like ours, there are two different levels and it can be hard for information to be shared quickly and accurately between each department. Unless we make specific space to talk about this, those experiences might stay within their departments. One of the things that I think has been really positive for us has been providing opportunities for the round table discussions that Katie mentioned. This way we get members of our children’s department team together with our reference customer service and other departments so we can all have a full picture of what is happening in the library as a whole. Also, like many other libraries, we did make some changes to our official sexual harassment policies and we did train all staff on them. One of the things I think has been really helpful for us and libraries we’ve worked with has been to train staff on those policies and help them understand how the policies exist to support them and protect them in their work.

KATIE MCCLAIN: One thing I would like to add for libraries that may be just starting this conversation, as a department or as an organization, brainstorm some responses that members can use in the moment. Because sometimes part of these interactions is not knowing what to do as it's happening. I still have that reaction sometimes and I'm talking very publicly about it and very openly about it but sometimes having a list of responses that you can refer to and practice and role play. Even though it may not be specific procedure or policy, it could be an effective method for libraries to use as they kind of figure out these larger pieces. Giving the staff immediately something to work with so that they feel they can say something as it is happening.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Kind of a tool box people have that they can use in different situations? So can you give some examples?

AMANDA CIVITELLO: I like the term tool box because it suggests that you can use different phrases and different techniques in different situations. I found that often simple and direct will work for the lower end of the spectrum in terms of it's not posing in immediate danger to staff, maybe someone makes me uncomfortable comment. Looking at the patron and saying, “That’s inappropriate.” That can sometimes just stop it in its tracks. If the patron continues to push back, I like to just turn into a broken record and say, “That's inappropriate. That’s inappropriate.” Referring somebody back to the reason that they’re there, which is library services, you can pointedly ask them, “Did you have a question about the library?” Sometimes that will guide the conversation back. The other thing that I really try to mention, and of course this is easier said than done, but know that you can leave an interaction. Our role as library employees does not mean we have to continue to assist someone who is making us feel uncomfortable or possibly unsafe. This was a lesson that I kind of had to learn for myself but if someone is continually making inappropriate comments about what I am wearing, what I'm wearing maybe very professional and appropriate but if their making creepy comments, my manager and our administrators have told me it is perfectly fine to say, “I'm going to find someone else to assist you.” and then leave. It is not just part of the job. It is okay and we need to embrace the idea that it is okay to walk away from situations like that.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Very good advice. To make it clear that it doesn't necessarily have to be about sex or sexual harassment. There are different kinds of harassment; racial or ethnic or gender identity, sexual orientation. All of these are forms of harassment that you don't need to subject yourself to ever but especially on the job I guess and I am assuming that you heard stories about that as well as.

KATIE MCCLAIN: Sexuality is really important to any conversation about sexual harassment because speaking from the “L” corner of the LGBTQ spectrum that creates an additional layer of complexity when these situations happen to me or colleagues. One area we feel specifically important is underage workers because for teenage workers, this is often times their first job and the type of work that we give them (sorting materials, shelving) that kind of thing takes them away from the sightlines of the desks, away from the oversight of their managers and puts them in isolated spots in the library where they are at particular risk. So not only are they encountering sexual harassment at school that could then follow them to the workplace, we are also putting them in an environment where it can be easier for those situations to occur.
DEIRDRE BRENNAN: What are the major steps forward that you think we can take in our libraries and just across our profession to try to at least remediate this situation and empower people to take care of themselves any suggestions or thoughts?

KATIE MCCLAIN: The first step we are doing here is having a conversation about it but the conversation needs to be organization-wide. It can't just be amongst co-workers who can sympathize with each other but may not have any power to enact change. It’s important to start the conversation but it is essential that managers and administrators be part of these conversations. There's a tendency to downplay these types of experiences saying, “Oh, you're overreacting. “It's not that big of a deal” or “oh, that's just how things are.” But I think the time has come where a lot more people are starting to say no. This may be the way things are but we’re not okay with that. If managers and administrators really want to in act change and support their employees, they need to sit back, listen, and believe their employees. Any decisions that are made about safety on any policies and procedures moving forward really need to be done with the input of the staff members who are directly experiencing this. They may have insights people higher up the library chain of command may not may not be aware of or may not think of. Getting all staff input and buy-in on possible changes and safety procedures is really essential. Then continue the conversation because this isn't a problem that can just be fixed with a couple months of roundtable discussions, adding a new safety member and then boom it’s fixed. This is going to be an ongoing issue that everyone is going to have to deal with it some point but if the library can emphasize and continue to demonstrate that they have their employees’ backs and that they are willing to take action when something happens, it will result in staff members feeling safer and create a more relaxed and welcoming work environment.

AMANDA CIVITELLO: What Katie’s talking about amounts to a significant cultural change for many libraries. We're talking about moving towards a workplace culture where staff members feel supported and there are spaces they can talk about these issues and where they are aware that administration takes their concerns seriously and translates that into actionable steps that they can implement to keep their employees safer at work. Anytime you try to embark on a culture change like that, I think it's really important to pay attention to the needs of all your staff members. Make sure nobody gets left behind so that everyone moves forward together. Wherein what bothers one staff member really might not bother another staff person and helping those colleagues to have conversations to understand where everyone's coming from, that everyone has different boundaries, everyone has different experiences, can be really powerful because we have seen both sides. We’ve seen situations where one coworker says “Well, I didn’t think it was that bad” and others where a member of staff says, “I'm tired of seeing my colleagues have to put up with this. What can I do to make a change?” It is important for managers and administration to provide the type of environment where change can happen.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I’m curious, is the Board aware of this?

AMANDA CIVITELLO: Our Board of Trustees has been very, very supportive of this work. They were involved, kind of from the get-go, because they really felt strongly that the work we were doing was valuable not just to us at the library where of course they take our staff experiences seriously but to the profession. They really saw the opportunity to be a catalyst for other libraries to take steps to create a safer, more positive environment for their staff.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That’s great because that is how culture change will happen. So, is there anything else that you would like to say, Amanda or Katie?

KATIE MCCLAIN: One of the big learning experiences for me in doing all of these presentations and being a very vocal advocate for action towards this issue is that no matter how much you talk about it, how informed about this issue that you think you are, you can still have bad days where you don't know how to respond. A patient's actions may just really rattle you. Something that happened and if it happened a few days previously you might have been okay but for whatever reason that day it just really bothers you. It's okay to not be okay. Unfortunately, I kind of had to learn that the hard way last year where after a string of patron interactions I had to take a personal day from work because I was so exhausted from talking about it and having to deal with it. My initial reaction was to mentally say, “Hang on a minute, you're talking about this to other librarians. You can't have a mini mental breakdown about this.” But it’s a really tough issue that no one should have to deal with but they do. Giving yourself the space to feel what you feel and to have the reaction that you have; that’s totally fine. If something really rattles you, it's okay to acknowledge that to yourself. Then after you acknowledged it you can hopefully pick yourself up and continue on to going another day.

AMANDA CIVITELLO: Piggybacking on that, ending an interaction or redirecting a patron during an interaction that is uncomfortable is not bad customer service. That is one of the concerns that a lot of library staff members bring to us. They say, “If I tell a patron they are inappropriate I am not providing good customer service.” The best thing you can do to provide good customer service is to create a safe working environment for staff and for other patrons. Allowing someone’s behavior to go unchecked when it is truly is inappropriate isn’t providing good service at all, even if that patron ultimately goes on their merry way because in the end we’re not doing a service to anybody if we’re allowing that behavior to be tolerated in the library.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: You’re right, that is an excellent point. Thank you very much for being our guests today, again, Katie McClain and Amanda Civitello from the Waukegan Public Library in Illinois. I know that if any of our listeners want to get in touch with either of you for more information you would be very glad to hear from them. Am I correct?

AMANDA CIVITELLO: Via our website we have a couple different contact forms. You can find my contact information on our “contact staff members” page. You can also download a version of our presentation at waukeganpl.org/alaac17.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Thank you very much. I imagine we'll be hearing more about your activities as time goes on. Thanks very much Amanda and Katie. Thank you very much for listening to Sparks today. Sparks is produced by the Reaching Across Illinois Library System. If you would like to learn more about the show or share your feedback on the topics discussed, please visit railslibraries.info/sparks.