*SPARKS Episode 24*

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Welcome to the 24th episode of Sparks! I am Deirdre Brennan, Executive Director of RAILS, Reaching Across Illinois Library System. We started this podcast to spark conversation and debate about trends and issues in libraries. My guest today is Brian Shepard. He is the Executive Director of the Indian Trails Public Library District, based in Wheeling Buffalo Grove, Northwest a little bit of Chicago. Brian is the Illinois librarian of the Year! Congratulations, Brian.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Thank you so much Dee.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: well-earned, well-deserved

BRIAN SHEPARD: It's been very humbling, honestly, to be named the librarian of the year. It's been quite an honor and I'm really humbled by it.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Well, I'm a big fan of awards, especially when they go to someone like you. I think I know what you mean about humbling but it's really about the library, right? I mean, it's an opportunity to raise the level of the library and libraries in general. So, it gives you an opportunity to talk about the library and what you're doing right?

BRIAN SHEPARD: Absolutely. For me, with awards, I look at a few things. First, looking at the people who received the award in the past is meaningful, in the sense that some of the people who received or have been named librarian of the year are people who I just hold in such high respect. More than that, it allows us to go into our local community and really have them see how the library is making an impact throughout. So, over the last month-and-a-half that that was announced, we've had everything from recognition at village board meetings to our local Rotary Club meetings. I think that while they all have said that the library is doing great work, this really confirms it in their minds and puts the focus on the library, which is really where I want it to be.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Do you have any specific examples of the adulation that you have received that we can experience vicariously?

BRIAN SHEPARD: Yeah, so actually last week I was at our local village board meeting and they asked me to come up and they read a proclamation recognizing me as librarian of the year. When I went up to the front, they made me stand there for probably the most uncomfortable three minutes of my life as they read the award nomination and the information. Then they gave me a standing ovation at the end of it.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Oh, that’s great.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Really, again, I said it's really due to the great work that's happening with the staff at the library and the the great work of our board. That's really where I want the focus to be but it gives us that platform to be able to share that with people.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Absolutely and shout out for awards, in general. I think this is an Illinois Library Association Award, of course and I think that all of our listeners should take note that this provides a really fantastic opportunity, sort of a soap box stage for a library or a service or whatever it is that the award is about to be a publicized and it sort of raises all boats.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Absolutely

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Not to diminish your accomplishments at all in any way. I think I said it was so well earned.

BRIAN SHEPARD: I think that there were multiple news articles written about it. For a lot of people who maybe haven't been in libraries recently, it just gives us an opportunity to talk about all the great things that are happening in libraries and to see us in a different way. Awards give that platform to be able to do that which wouldn’t necessarily otherwise been able to happen.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That is a great segue way. So, let’s talk about your library then. Tell us some of the things that you're excited about. I know the library is joining CCS. I'm excited about that. I believe RAILS was a little helpful in that regard…

BRIAN SHEAPRD: They were, indeed, yes!

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That's great. How is that going and what else is going on that you'd like to tell us about?

BRIAN SHEPARD: There's a lot of stuff is going on at Indian Trails. For people who haven't been in Indian Trail over the last couple of years, we started with a construction project a few years ago which added about fifteen thousand square feet and completely renovated the interior of the building. I think it really transformed that space to be a true community space.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Absolutely, it is fantastic.

BRIAN SHEPARD: We still see a lot of foot traffic coming through the building. Our foot traffic went up 30% after we built that building. We still hear a lot of comments from people and we see comments on Facebook and in different places where people who maybe grew up with the library and haven't been here in a while, they'll post to a friend and say if you have not been to this Library you need to get out and take a look at it.

DERIDRE BRENNAN: That’s great.

BRIAN SHEPARD: We really were influenced a lot by creating a welcoming space that was really focused more on being from the hospitality sector then it was necessarily looking at it as an institutional space. So, everything from finishes, to the layout, were things that we were able to put into this building. That has been really transformative in terms of how people see the library and how they use the library. For us, it's now about leveraging that and really leveraging that building to build on it even more services that create a bigger impact in the community. Everything from looking towards civic engagement and bringing people together, finding ways that we can really promote civil conversation, discussion and dialogue, which I think is so needed in our country right now. I think libraries can create the place and the atmosphere to make that happen. That's one thing that I'm thinking a lot about right now. I think about equity, diversity, and inclusion, what we can do with that, so a variety of things

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So what are you doing with that? I know you’re sort of partnering, at least at the moment, with Schaumburg Township District Library and Skokie Public Library?

BRIAN SHEPARD: Yeah, this is something we started earlier this year and I think there's a lot of great work that's happening in libraries across the state but Skokie Public Library has been doing a tremendous amount of work related to equity, diversity, and inclusion over the last few years. This is an important topic and I think it's important for us as a library community to talk about both internally with our staff, to be able to have these discussions as a staff but ultimately it's about how we can better serve the community which is diverse and which does have that diversity that we want to make sure that we can serve everybody. Monica Harris from Schaumburg and Richard Kang from Skokie, the three of us really talking earlier this week this year about how we can maybe work together as organizations that are going down the similar pathway that are at different places on this pathway on this road for discussion of EDI. How we can work together to really best learn from each other and to learn from each other’s experiences of the things that work, the things that don't work, to support each other as we go through these type of conversations because they're hard and they take a lot of time, effort, and energy. We want to support each other as we're all going through this topic.

DERIDRE BRENNAN: Yes and RAILS wants to learn from you three libraries because we believe that we have a role too. I talked to Richard about this when he came to one of our board meetings and talked to our board about EDI and I know we're trying to figure out what our role is. I think it's about helping libraries understand that it does apply to them. I think that often is it hard to see sometimes as well as hard to talk about in different communities all across Illinois. Some you could say are more apparently diverse than others but we would like to be able to help libraries go down that path as well. So we're very interested in what you libraries do.

BRIAN SHEPARD: It's a topic that takes a lot of courage to really go through and have these conversations because I think everybody's afraid they’re going to say the wrong thing, going to do the wrong thing, or take a misstep. But you can't make progress, how much you're willing to take a step in that direction. That sometimes means you're going to run into something that isn't going to work or that you need to keep continue at it and continue to have the courage to talk about these topics because they are very important.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So are you looking internally first in the library or are you engaging the community in the conversations as well? Where are you at with this?

BRIAN SHEPARD: We are talking about this as a staff internally. We're talking about equity, diversity, and inclusion as it relates to our staff and as it relates to how we interact with each other but ultimately I believe that EDI has applications across everything that we do, whether it's in how we talk with each other internally, or how we work with our community from an external perspective. It really covers the range of all of those things. So, to work with our staff on creating an awareness ultimately does lead to better overall public service and better overall focus on the community.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: This sounds like a passion project for you. Would that be right?

BRIAN SHEPARD: I would say that a passion for me right now, and this is something that I talked to library directors about, is how we balance the day-to-day work that we have. I think on a day to day basis you can just get completely consumed by budgets, human resources issues, and dealing with maybe some issues in your community. So, really trying to stay grounded and think what else is it that really is motivating you and that you're passionate about? For me EDI and civic engagement and the combination of those things are things that I'm very interested in right now. What can we do as a library and be that place that we can bring diverse people within our community together and be willing to take on topics that might be a little bit harder to take on but that ultimately build understanding and awareness within our community.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Brian this is all great; you’re at this wonderful place in your career and you’ve got this great library. What got you started as a librarian? I'm always curious about the path that people take because there are so many different paths. So what's your path been and how did it start?

BRIAN SHEPARD: My experience working in libraries started when I was in high school. I was looking for a part-time job, like I think a lot of high school students look for, and it just turned out that my local library had a job as a Shelver. That was the job that worked out best for my schedule. I started there, never believing that it was going to ultimately be my career. I never thought I was going to be working my entire career in libraries but after I joined libraries I really saw the passion of people who work for libraries and the passion for helping people in the community and the difference and impact that made. After a few years working in corporate America I made the decision to then go back to work in libraries and to ultimately get my masters in library science and to work in libraries as my career. So, that's kind of my background of becoming a librarian.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So, you went over to corporate for a while. That’s interesting. I did that also. We have plenty of colleagues who knew when they were born that they wanted to be a librarian. That was not the case for me either.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Again, in having worked in corporate America for two years, I loved my time in Corporate America. I mean, it was interesting work, well, as interesting as life insurance can be but it was interesting work. It was just something that I felt that if I was going to work my whole life, I wanted to work at something I was going to make a difference with. I remember my time in libraries and that was ultimately why. The people who I had worked with previously really showed me the impact that libraries could have. That really hit home as to why to work in libraries. I can share one of the ways that really played out in a very clear way, even after I became a Library Director that really kind of crystallized this for me. When I started as Library Director, of course I was doing what every Library Director should try to do and that is experience every different aspect of the library. So I was going to sit in with Youth Services, with Adult Services, and all the different areas to try to understand what was happening. One day, my first probably month on the job, I found myself in an ESL class. At this ESL class the teacher asked the question of the students, “What are your dreams?” I remember that question because first of all, trying to explain to ESL students what that question meant was a little bit difficult. At first they were thinking, “Are you talking about when I go to sleep at night?” Of course the answer is no, not when you go to sleep at night but what do you think about when you first get up in the morning? Over the next five or ten minutes I heard all of the students, about twenty students, talk about how they dreamed of better jobs, being able to advance their careers, being able to talk with their kids’ teachers, with the people at the grocery store, and getting better health care. In all of those things they were talking about, I realized that every single one of those people saw the library as helping to make those dreams become a reality. That was why they were sitting in the room. That was why they were doing the ESL class. That, to me, I think fundamentally, is what we do in so many different areas. Whether it's those ESL classes, those people who are starting up a business, persons who are meeting in our study rooms to have those business meetings, kids coming in and learning how to read for the first time, we're helping to make those dreams become a reality. That is what ultimately drives me, what motivates me, and what really makes me love being a librarian and doing this work.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That is a powerful story and evidence of why you are librarian of the year. I have to say because that you are obviously so connected to what it is that libraries do. That's fantastic, really, I don't know how to follow that! I do want to circle back to your building because I love the Indian Trails Public Library District building. I didn't see it before, so maybe I can't appreciate it as completely as people who saw the “before” but I've seen the “after” and it's really fantastic. You go in there and it's bright; it just makes you feel good to be in there. It has a wonderful vibe. I'm wondering, were their particular things that made that possible? Were there decisions that you made where if you'd made a different decision there would have been some very different outcome or anything that stands out in your mind like that?  
BRIAN SHEPARD: When I look at our construction project at Indian Trails it's very interesting to me. First of all, for you to call it my building…

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Every Library Director kind of does that though, right?

BRIAN SHEPARD: Right and it is funny to think about. In some ways I do think that a construction project does take on, at least to some degree, the personality of the Director. I think that there are elements and I've had that feedback. People who walk in Indian Trails, people who know me well, say this feels like a building that I would have been involved in because it does, in terms of design, spaces, and finishes, I think a lot of that does kind of somewhat take on the personality of the director. But I think for our project, one of the things that really made it special and got to the point where it's at is that everybody who is working on the project had very clear roles and very clear understanding of what those roles were through the process. It really starts with my Board of Trustees who had very clear objectives of what they wanted from the building and who were willing to work with me but give me the space as the Director to work through all of the details and to absorb their information and come back in to say, “Hey, so this is what I'm hearing from you, this is what your goal is…” The goal was to transform our space to be an active engaging community space for our residences. That was the goal that was stated, which came from discussion from the Board of Trustees. So the Board understood what their role was on the project and then gave me the team to make that become a reality. They didn't get involved in all the day-to-day decisions and all the day-to-day kind of thinking. They allowed the design team, construction team, and staff to really work through these issues and to design what I think is ultimately a building that is serving the community very, very well. That only happens if everybody understands their role from the front end of the process.  
DERIDRE BRENNAN: Yes, that's for sure. A good process makes for a good product, ultimately. It’s not the only thing you need but you need that for sure.

BRIAN SHEPARD: I'm grateful that the Board of Library Trustees at Indian Trails showed a lot of trust in me. They gave me the space, really, to do the work that needed to be done and they trusted that what they're going to see at the end was going to be a great product. In fact, one of my former trustees, I still remember she said to me when she saw some of the material boards she wasn't quite sure how it was all going to look at the end. She’s like but my background is not in design. We had a designer, we were working with a great design team. When she saw it all put together at the end she's like this is the reason why I, as a trustee, was not doing all the design work. That is why we brought that expertise on staff.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That’s great, great that's how it should work.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Some of the inspiration for our building, we talked about how libraries have evolved over the years. We all know this, I think, as library professionals but so many people still see us as at storehouse of books. We’ll often share with people, yes, that was how libraries started. We were that storehouse and repository of information but really, about twenty or thirty years ago we saw the first major evolution of the library to be more finders of information. As information explodes online, we aren’t just storing information anymore; we're finding information. We're going about being able to help our communities be able to do that effectively as we try to cut through all of these resources that are now available to us inside of data. What we've seen really over the last, say, ten years is the next evolution of libraries which is to be creators of information. We go from storehouse, to finders, to creators. That is fundamentally when you look through our building and you look at our design space and everything that's there; we have all three of those elements within our design or within our building space.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Yeah, that's a really good way of describing evolution, you're absolutely right. I mean, it used to be that the library was the building you could go to, to literally the building. There was no remote anything. You had to go to the building to get access to anything, like the reader's guide. It was like aggregating information for people and then it was helping people navigate through all of it because there was too much of it. Then, like you said, the next thing was being creative, creating your own information. That's awesome.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Yeah and I think one of the things that I've been able to share with some stakeholders, and it's not a perfect example but I use the example to think about your phone. If you have an iPhone in your pocket and you think about where that has evolved over, say, the last twenty years. I say twenty years because, really about twenty years ago roughly, the first product comes out from Apple and it’s an iPod. An iPod is all about simply first storing songs and then it was all about storing songs and videos. So it was a storage device that you would listen to your songs on or watch a video. In 2007, Apple comes out with the iPhone and suddenly that which is still a storage device and can still store songs now becomes a finding device. People can use it for Yelp, and they can use it for maps, and for being able to find information. In the last two or three years in the newest evolution of the iPhone, what we now see is more creative. About two years ago the marketing for the iPhone was all about how creators could use that phone to create content and movie content. I think we see that same evolution that is happening in a very shorter time period in other information systems, like the library. Seeing that and then I think that also helps us as we start to think forward, like where are those devices going and what does that mean for where the library is going because I think that there is somewhat of a parallel track that is happening there.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I think it's related to the rise of self-publishing too. That never had a place in libraries, now it does and it's about that personal creativity.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Absolutely. One of the interesting things in our new building is of course we have a sound booth in our building where people can come in and record. We have people coming in recording video and audio but we also have self-published authors coming in and recording their own books. So, we're helping to create that content through the library,

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Very cool. So, one last question: if you were going to tell us a favorite anecdote from your past what would it be?

BRIAN SHEPARD: I can tell you my favorite library experience.

DERIDRE BRENNAN: Okay, that's perfect.

BRIAN SHEPARD: About four or five years ago I had the great opportunity to travel down to Guatemala and do some work in a school that was right off the Rio Dolce River in Guatemala. When I was there I was talking with the School Director and he had heard that I was a Library Director so, he asked me to come into the library and to talk with him about his collection and what was available in the library. I'm thinking, I'm getting the opportunity to do collection development essentially in the jungles of Guatemala, which is just absolutely amazing. I'm standing in the library and the Director of the school says to me, we can't get kids to come in here and want to read the books. They don't want to come in. Do you have any advice? I looked down at the shelf and I picked up an Accounting 101 textbook. I said to the school director, “Well, I'm a native English speaker and I don't want to read this book.” I mean its Accounting 101, who in their right mind wants to read it? This is not a book that you would pick up for enjoyment. I said we really need to find a way to get books down here that the kids are going to enjoy. So, over the next year at our library, we pulled some books aside. While the kids were high school students, they were early reading students in terms of reading English. So, we were able to find English and Spanish children's books that we could send down. Because I've gone on his trip with my Rotary Club, we sent them down with the next year's team. There's this great picture of one of our Rotarians with these three high school aged young men reading Curious George and it's in English and Spanish. Just the smiles on their faces as they were reading this book was very satisfying in the sense that we can make a difference. Being able to use my professional experience and being able to help to maybe create a collection there was a huge thing.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Right, getting the right book into the hands of the user.

BRIAN SHEPARD: So, I think they’re reading Curious George more than Accounting 101.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: It has been a great pleasure talking with you, Brian. To get in touch with you about any of the things you have talked about or other things they can find you at the Indian Trails Public Library District.

BRIAN SHEPARD: Absolutely, thank you very much for having me.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: 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.