The Potential for Retirees in Advocacy

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Ah, retirement! What so many of us think about and plan for!

As the library profession ages, more librarians will be leaving school library jobs and seeking a sunny beach or ski resort or spending time with grandchildren. However, old habits don’t die. After years of advocating for students’ rights to information, free speech, and access to learning opportunities, retired school librarians are or can be a powerful force of untapped advocacy talent. Are we including them and enabling them to continue their good work?

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), librarians represent an aging profession—63% of all types of librarians in 2016 were 54 years old or older. With enough years of service, many school librarians can retire at 55, some with a respectable pension. However, those passionate about school libraries seldom fade away. Today, there are many school librarians who have retired from K–12 positions and are leading major advocacy efforts—in truth, far from “retired.” For example, Dorcas Hand and Debbie Hall (2018), retired Texas school librarians, are leading the fight to save school librarians in the Houston Independent School District. In addition, retired school librarian Sara Kelly Johns continues to serve in many New York and national library legislative leadership roles while preparing future school librarians as an adjunct professor (Geddes, 2017). Susan Yutzy also does amazing advocacy work in Ohio and nationally (Abercrombie, 2017), as do many others, too numerous to mention here. But are employed school librarians reaching out to retirees to invite them to help maintain vibrant school library programs?

Why Retirees Can Be the Best Advocates

No one knows the job better than a retired librarian. With years of experience working with students, teachers, administrators, and parents, retired school librarians recognize the opportunities and barriers to maintaining strong school library programs. They have become established leaders in their communities and created strong bonds with other community leaders over the years. They know who the movers and shakers are and, whether they recognize it or not, are socially and politically connected locally, perhaps even in their states or nationally, depending on their level of civic engagement.

Retired librarians have honed skill sets in organization, communication, technology, and collaboration—ideal for creating and managing advocacy plans to ensure that schools continue to have school librarians and libraries for students. They know how to articulate the importance of equitable library programs for all students, because they have lived it. They can develop websites, maintain listservs of advocates and send out email blasts, manage Facebook and Twitter accounts for advocacy campaigns, and write op-eds for local news outlets. They may belong to retired teacher organizations or other civic groups of like-minded retirees who value education and libraries.

Retirees have more flexible time, although most often remark that they wonder how they ever managed to hold down a full-time job because they are so busy in retirement. However, it is far easier for retirees to adjust their schedules to visit legislators, make phone calls, and attend meetings during the day, when employed librarians are working. Legislators know that retirees tend to be voters, especially educated retirees, and listen to their concerns. Elected officials also recognize that when retired school librarians advocate for library services for students, it’s altruistic. They are speaking about what’s best for kids, not themselves.

But, most importantly, retirees are no longer hampered by the inability to speak out against school practices and policies to which they may object. As an employee of a school district, which is a government agency, school librarians have had to make hard choices about when and how they openly advocate for school library positions and resources. Often, they are in opposition to school decision makers who hold power over librarian positions or library conditions, such as budgets, schedules, and other support. All people are entitled to freedom of speech, but in reality, school employees...
are often threatened, whether subtly or overtly, when they speak out. The fear of retribution is the elephant in the room that is more real than often realized. As announcements are made to furlough librarians and defund or close school library programs, school library advocates are frequently placed in the crosshairs of a contentious local community battle, often with far-reaching implications. If school librarians speak out against cuts, some people perceive this as self-serving to save their own jobs. In some cases, librarians have been bullied by administrators not to speak in public about school decisions impacting library programs. However, proven time and again, librarians who remain silent, hoping for the best, are in fact enabling the decisions to reduce or cut library programs and staffing as the least squeaky wheel.

LIBRARY BOOSTERS OR FRIENDS CLUBS

There’s a reason school boards seldom cut band programs and sports teams—because of the influential community members who run the booster clubs, funneling valuable resources into school programs. These are the same people who influence local elections and can help advance or sink the election campaigns of school board members and other local elected officials. What might happen if school library programs had booster clubs?

Most athletic and band booster clubs raise money to purchase uniforms, fund travel expenses, and/or pay for social and educational events for a particular group of students. Money raised is targeted to a specific need or purpose, with students being the clear beneficiaries. Embracing this model, a library booster club, for example, could target funds to pay for a Spanish book collection for ELL students, to bring an author or visiting artist to the school, for travel expenses to take college-bound juniors to visit a local college library, or to buy a 3D printer or associated technology for students to enhance their science fair projects. Specific articulated purposes “sell” better than a fundraiser to buy more library books. Contributors need to understand exactly how the donations impact students.

Booster clubs or “Friends of the School Library” groups “provide the library with a high profile within the school community and outside of it,” according to Reed (2013, p. 1). Contributions don’t always have to be monetary. In St. Croix, Wisconsin, a “Reading Friends” group of retirees was created to tutor elementary students to improve reading skills (Platt & Brissett-Kruger, 2015). By highlighting a specific need, such groups are painting the picture to those who contribute how the school library program is intricately interwoven into the educational program of the school and how it directly impacts students and their academic achievement. This level of understanding is the foundation of advocacy work. Retired librarians and other retired educators could be the catalysts not only to bolster the library financially but also to establish a network of supporters who will speak out when library programs and positions are threatened.

CONCLUSION

There is great freedom in retirement—both in spending time doing valued and important things that full-time employment didn’t permit and in supporting causes that employment in a government agency discouraged. Many retired school librarians want to pay forward or give back to a profession that has given them so much. Taking a leadership role and participating in advocacy work to help those colleagues still in the trenches is rewarding and fulfilling work and gives retirees opportunities to share the skills learned and connections made from years of experience.

For currently employed librarians, there is no shame in asking for help when you put students first. Seek school library or teacher retirees who have been strong school library advocates and ask them to be your advocacy arm, maybe in the guise of creating a library booster club. These people are usually connected to local community leaders and have the skill sets to manage a potent advocacy campaign or plan. Don’t wait until the school board announces library position cuts. Be proactive and ask now! Students and teachers are depending on the actions of school librarians to maintain and advocate for strong school library programs. Reach out to retired colleagues and let them know that their expertise is valued and needed, now more than ever, to help preserve school library programs for today and tomorrow’s school children.

REFERENCES

BEING DIFFERENT

Kelly, Erin Entrada. **You Go First.** Greenwillow Books, 2018. 304p. $16.99. ISBN: 9780062652218. Grades 3-7. Twelve-year-old Charlotte and eleven-year-old Ben are good friends, although they live nowhere near each other. They are Scrabble contestants in an online game. They’re both highly gifted, experiencing family drama—Charlotte’s elderly father is in the hospital with a heart attack and Ben’s parents are divorcing—and trying to figure out where they fit in middle school.

When bullies cause Ben to wet himself during an all-school speech and Charlotte’s best friend starts to pull away to be friends with the popular girls and says some mean things about her, which she overhears, they have each other and their online games to fall back on. Will they be able to make real face-to-face friends and get through middle school?

Rosenblatt, Darcey. **Lost Boys.** Henry Holt, 2017. 288p. $16.99. ISBN: 9781627797580. Grades 4-8. Twelve-year-old Reza’s extremely religious mother, Sameer, is trying to persuade him to enlist in Iran’s war effort. But all Reza wants to do is play music, aided and abetted by his non-religious and on-the-run uncle, who believes that his musical talent is a gift from Allah, not a sinful activity, like the mullahs and Sameer say. He sneaks Reza a tape player, earphones, and bootleg tapes. When Sameer discovers them, she breaks the player, throws it away, and evicts her brother, who is then killed. When Reza’s best friend, Ebi, decided he’s enlisting, Reza joins him.

The teenaged soldiers aren’t taught to fight, just tied together and sent into a mine field, to clear it for the adult soldiers. Both boys end up captured. Reza ends up in the best of the Iraqi POW camps, where he has music class once a week with a Red Crescent worker named Miles, but he is also bullied by a sadistic guard. Although Reza is thrilled to be able to actually study music and play Miles’ guitar, when Miles is sent away, and the bully guard targets Reza, Reza decides he needs to escape. Can he get to Miles before the Red Crescent plane leaves?

Shotz, Jennifer Li. **Hero.** Harper Collins, 2016. 216p. $12.99. ISBN: 9780062652218. Grades 3-5. Twelve-year-old Ben is presented by his Kp officer dad with a retired search-and-rescue dog named Hero, under the understanding that he will keep his grades up. But when Ben and Hero discover an injured and frightened puppy who has been used as a bait dog in a dog-fighting ring, Hero insists on the puppy going home with them. Ben names him Scout.

On the top of all that, Ben is competing with Jack for the slot of shortstop on the varsity baseball team. But Ben finds he can’t keep up with dogs, homework, and try-outs, especially when he gets involved in trying to take down the dog-fighting ring. It all causes him to let his best friend, Noah, down, too.

When Scout goes missing, it’s up to Hero’s search-and-rescue skills to find him. Then, it’s up to Ben to get him out safely from the ring. Meanwhile, Jack’s beloved golden retriever, dies, and Ben’s parents say he can’t keep Scout - too much to do! Should Ben let Jack have Scout?

Townsend, Jessica. **Nevermoor: The Trials of Morrigan Crow.** Little, Brown, 2017. 461p. $17.99. ISBN: 9780316508889. Grades 3-7. Eleven-year-old Morrigan was an Eventide baby. Eventide babies are considered cursed, blamed for everything that goes wrong around them, and cursed to die at midnight of their twelfth birthday. On Bid Day, when every eleven-year-old gathers to hear if they have been bid on for an apprenticeship or not, no one ever bids on an Eventide. But the most famous man in their country does bid on Morrigan, and takes her to a secret magical place to compete for a spot on an important council! To be accepted, she has to have a special knack, and Morrigan knows she doesn’t have one. But her mentor says she does and she’ll find it in time to win the competition.

Learning to win each of the stages of the competition takes a lot of time and energy, but she can’t help but worry about what her talent may be. She has no idea. Meanwhile, who is the strange man, who also bid on her, who keeps popping up? What does he want? And will Morrigan figure out her talent in time??


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