Frightening Memories of a PNLA Leads Mentor

John Finn, Branch Manager, Beaverton City Library @ Murray Scholls, Beaverton, OR

Abstract: In this invited article John Finn reflects on what it was like to be a mentor at the first-ever PNLA Leads institute in 2004. At the time that he served as mentor, he was the Head of the Information Department at Great Falls Public Library in Great Falls, MT and a graduate of the Snowbird Library Leadership Institute (1999).

Keywords: leadership, mentoring, PNLA Leads


I have memories of those five October days in Federal Way (WA) that haunt me to this day, and not just the memory of my Cardinals going down to the Red Sox and Curt Schilling’s bloody sock in four straight games.

I was initially honored and thrilled to be invited to join my friend and then-PNLA President Jan Zauha, at the first ever PNLA Leads institute in October of 2004. Jan would be there; John Shannon and Becky Schreiber, the leadership consultants I worked with at Snowbird, would be there; what could be better? Jan explained that the participants and the mentors would come from all walks of librarian life and come from all levels of experience. Looking back, I was the obvious newbie mentor. I was halfway into my term as President of the Montana Library Association. That seemed to be my credential. When I arrived at the retreat I was paired with another mentor who happened to be Ann Symons, Past President of ALA. I felt a little full of myself.

The week was looking great for me. Then I quickly remembered that the pain of self-discovery is the name of the game at leadership institutes. I was not prepared to do it all over again as a mentor. So it was then, when the week began, that I instantly felt in over my head. I felt like I had made a mistake. I felt like I was not prepared to be a mentor at this event, that I didn’t have the experiences or history or expertise to do this. Oh, and what’s that? You need me to speak to the assembled group for fifteen minutes about what I think about being a library leader? Gulp.

I was asked to be a mentor at this first ever PNLA Leads institute, but I ended up learning far more about myself than I had ever anticipated. More importantly I learned what it is to be a true mentor, because I saw others around me providing the kind of support and encouragement needed to fulfill that role.

The memories that haunt me are of the times that week when participants may have tried to gain some knowledge or asked for some bit of advice from me. What did I tell them? What kind of advice could I have given them? And that presentation. I don’t remember what I said, but I know I felt quite awkward and humbled. But these painful memories were valuable to me. I learned from them. They made me a better person, a better librarian, and a better mentor.

The most difficult aspect of being a mentor at this event was our direction to stand back and be an observer: "Do not participate too closely in the activities for which you are the leader and giving instruction.” I understood that the exercises were for the participants. They were designed for their self-discovery. They were designed for them to learn about themselves. I stood back and watched and wondered to myself, how would I answer this question? How will I tackle that task? I was a silent participant in all of the exercises.
But when the days were done is when I learned the most. I saw Ann sitting down with participants asking about their day: what was good for them? what had they learned? By drawing them out she was providing the kind of support we all need from someone who has the experience to give us sound advice. I saw John and Becky holding court in the evenings. They were breezy and casual putting everyone at ease, then they would toss out that pearl of wisdom that knocked everybody’s socks off. I saw Jan making people laugh and giving encouragement. I saw people actually mentoring. It was refreshing and beneficial.

I so appreciate the leaders and mentors who have advised me. I am always in awe of those folks. The professionals who make it look effortless. After that week I watched the leaders I knew closely. How did they command that respect and how did they instill that confidence? Why was their advice taken with such weight? How did they make themselves accessible to those who sought their guidance? How could I do the same?

My most important mentor relationship is also one that I cherish as a friendship. I have found that the most meaningful mentors I have had have developed naturally over time with folks I may have a personal connection with first. Those people have had a sense of who I am personally before they really knew me professionally. Rather than participate in a formal or sponsored mentorship program I seek opportunities to gain from personal relationships.

I find now that I have reached “that age” when younger colleagues seek career advice from me in much the same way that I found useful. I also see fresher colleagues doing it differently these days. They don’t always seek out the colleague with the most experience, they seek the colleague who looks more like them. I have to admit that I am pretty square and there are much hipper librarians in my organization. Because of that I sometimes find myself making referrals if I sense a bad fit.

My first mentor has been a constant friend for the past 25 years. The mentorship happened naturally. I didn’t really know what a mentor was and nothing formal was ever discussed. It was not until my first leadership institute experience that I recognized that bond as a mentor/mentee relationship as well as a friendship. I encourage newly minted librarians to find someone who they personally enjoy and whose work and accomplishments they respect. Forge a friendship either personally or professionally then seek that opportunity for a mentor relationship.

My big take away from that first PNLA Leads institute was my discovery that I suffer from a mild case of Imposter Syndrome, that psychological trait that tells you that you have not earned your stripes, but are simply lucky or have capitalized on being in the right place at the right time. This is something I still struggle with, but was a stronger trait in that period of my life. But by recognizing it at PNLA Leads, I have successfully dealt with the issue and have been able to move on. I would recommend others who are entering that mentor stage of life to embrace the new role. Know that you do have something to offer. Be open to sharing your thoughts and experiences. You just may make a huge difference in someone’s career.

If I were asked to go back to Federal Way to repeat that week in 2004 I would in a heartbeat. I feel I have much more to offer.

John Finn is a member of the Management Team of Beaverton City Library in Beaverton, OR and manages the Murray Scholls branch library. Previously, he was Director of the Hearst Free Library in Anaconda, MT, Head of the Information Department at Great Falls Public Library (MT), and a statewide public library consultant for the Montana State Library. John is a Past-President of the Montana Library Association. He received his MSLIS degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1995. He can be reached at jfinn@beavertonoregon.gov

CC0
To the extent possible under law, the person who associated CC0 with this work has waived all copyright and related or neighboring rights to this work.