

Christine

This podcast is produced on the ancestral homeland of the Nooksack and Lummi people. They have been its' stewards since time immemorial, respecting the land, river and ocean with the understanding that everything is connected, related and alive. We acknowledge the elders and their collective and individual plights and achievements. We consider the legacies of violence, displacement, migration and settlement that bring us together today and we pursue ongoing action to build lasting relationships and grow together so that all may prosper.

(interlude music plays)

Neil

WCLS in Whatcom County presents Library Stories, a podcast to open your eyes to all the ways your local public libraries matter. Join us as we reveal the power of sharing at the library. I'm your host, Neil McKay, Online Experience Coordinator for the Whatcom County Library System and today...

I'm here once again with my boss, Mary Vermilion.

Mary

Hey, Neil. It's been a few months, though.

Neil

It's been a few months. We've had some people standing in.

Mary

Yes, good to be across the desk from you.

Neil

We're going to jump right in today because we have a great conversation with four of our staff members who are receiving the Candace Morgan Intellectual Freedom Award at the Washington Library Association Conference.

Mary

That's a mouthful.

Neil

Yeah.

Mary

Yes. We're really proud of the four staff members who are receiving the award. That's Jonathan Jacobitz, Mary Kinser, Hana Boxberger and Emma Radosevich. And you'll meet all four of them on today's podcast.

Neil

Yeah. That's right. We get to talk to them. They're on their way right now to.

Mary

In fact, they just pulled away from just outside my office window. We just saw them heading south. Yeah.

Neil

So they're heading down to Tacoma, where the Washington Library Association conference is being held this year.

Mary

Yeah, that's right. I mean their award recognizes something really fundamental and important, which was intellectual freedom and the right to read as covered in the First Amendment and so extraordinarily important work that they're doing. And again we're just extremely proud that they've received this recognition from the Washington Library Association.

Neil

Yeah, that's right. And I'm honored to have gotten to sit down and have a four-way, five-way conversation with them, mostly a four-way conversation because I did a lot of listening.

Mary

Yeah. And for and both of us went through the training that they'll be talking about. And it was just such an excellent training. And so again, congratulations to Jonathan, Mary, Hana and Emma.

Neil

Yeah. All right. Well, let's get this started.

(interlude music plays)

Neil

I don't even know how really how to start this because I'm sitting here with four WCLS staff members.

Mary

I'm Mary Kinser. I'm a Collection Development Librarian, and my responsibility is to purchase mostly adult fiction and DVD's and maintain those collections for the library.

Emma

My name is Emma Radosevich. I am also a Collection Development Librarian and I primarily select nonfiction and eBooks and eAudiobooks.

Jonathan

I'm Jonathan Jakobitz and I'm the Blaine Library Branch Manager.

Hana

I'm Hana Boxberger and I'm Youth Services at the Lynden Library. I run all the programs and serve the families there.

Neil

You guys have been awarded the Candace Morgan Intellectual Freedom Award by the 2025 Washington Library Association Merit Awards Committee. So this is what I know, but you guys tell me what you know. The award and I only know this from looking on the website of course, but the award recognizes an individual or group for their efforts to defend, champion, support and or educate others about intellectual freedom in Washington state. What does that mean? What did you do?

Emma

Well, it was so sweet because we didn't even know that we were up for this award at all. Our coworker Maggie Mae Nase, who is our Learning Coordinator, secretly nominated us. And we worked with her because what we did was a training, a series of trainings that we did for all staff members.

Neil

A series of trainings. So what did that look like?

Jonathan

Well it looked like about a year's worth of prep of planning, discussions and adapting a training that other library systems had done that focus on equipping staff to be better prepared for intellectual freedom conversations with patrons and with coworkers. With the, just to be more knowledgeable in the values that we are grounded in as a profession.

Neil

OK. Well, we'll get back to the training, but now you're saying intellectual freedom, and I want to know what that means.

Emma

Hana, this was your area of the presentation that we made you do every single time.

Mary

No pressure.

Hana

Well, that's the kind of tricky part of it, is it is kind of hard to define and that's I think what we did run into in the training a lot was just, let's start with what do we think it means.

Emma

It's kind of an umbrella concept. I think I'm remembering like the visual of our like our little infographic in our slideshow where intellectual freedom is like the big umbrella concept, and then underneath that is privacy and confidentiality, the freedom to read and also freedom of speech. Which are like 3 pretty big ideas, but those are all encompassed by intellectual freedom.

Jonathan

Yeah, intellectual freedom is really grounded in the First Amendment to the Constitution, and it's a primary pillar of what libraries stand for; protecting individuals intellectual freedom. And it guides and directs everything that we do, really. From how we build our collections and provide materials to the public, how we protect patron confidentiality. It's all tied into intellectual freedom.

Hana

And it really does go back to these documents that exist in ALA, the American Library Association that provide that guidance and that groundwork for what our values and ethics are really. And that would be the Freedom to Read Statement and the Library Bill of Rights.

Neil

OK, so the ALA, the American Library Association is kind of the organization that guides us. What does the ALA do?

Mary

I mean, I think the ALA sort of sets expectations and responsibilities for libraries. It's really, that's where our core values stem from as an organization. And I think this is something that makes us a little bit different from other organizations because we do have these core values that, you know, really drive us toward freedom of exploration, of ideas, of concepts, of texts. You know, our mission really is to provide all kinds of information for people to explore and to get out of their way when they do it, and to also provide an arena of privacy for them to explore that in.

You can't have, you know, the ALA asserts that you can't have true freedom without privacy because if you're going to explore a controversial topic, you need to be able to know that other people aren't making judgments about why you're exploring those things. So, the ALA sort of provides us with those core values that guide what it is that we do in order to provide the opportunity for people to explore whatever it is that they're interested in.

Neil

OK. And so and what I've read is there are 5 core values. Can you guys name them?

Emma

Right now? Off the top of our head?

Neil

Right off the top.

Emma

I feel like, oh man.

Hana

Off your head. It's like a game.

Jonathan

Intellectual freedom and privacy, public good, sustainability and I'm drawing a blank on the 5<sup>th</sup> right now.

Emma

It's probably the last, most important one.

Jonathan

Equity.

Neil

That's it.

Jonathan

There we go.

Mary

Nice job.

Emma

Wow.

Neil

Let's do that a different way. Where I give you the answers.

Emma

Amazing.

Neil

And it'll sound cooler. You can all say them in unison or something. Alright, so can you name the five core values of the? Is this the five core values of?

Emma

Librarianship.

Jonathan

Of librarianship is, according to the ALA's website, it's a weird phrasing because you don't really see that word used in that way. These are the core values of librarianship.

Neil

OK. And what are they?

Jonathan

Access, equity.

Hana

Intellectual freedom and privacy

Emma

Public good.

Mary

Sustainability.

Neil

That's it. OK.

Jonathan

You gotta think of it like Captain Planet, you know, access. Equity.

Mary

Yes.

Jonathan

Intellectual freedom. Yeah. And by these 5 powers combined we are.

Hana

We need our rings.

Neil

OK. We'll work on that. Alright, off my notes here.

Mary

Guys, I'm glad you studied Jonathan, cause I did not.

Emma

I should have done that.

Jonathan

Well, I actually made a short little PowerPoint with these 5 core values for my staff for staff training and I did use a picture of Captain Planet to use that analogy of combining the powers. But then I realized...

Emma

See the memes do work, they work.

Jonathan

I'm too old for my people to really understand...

Mary

They don't know what it is.

Jonathan

...What Captain Planet is.

Mary

Right.

Emma

You know Steven Universe or something?

Hana

Well you're in the right group here, we all know what that means.

Mary

Right, we knew instantly.

Hana

Nice.

Neil

We also have the Library Bill of Rights. Can we talk about that a little? Is there anything to talk about with that?

Emma



Do you have it in front of us?

Neil

I do have it front of us.

Emma

Amazing. Yeah, because one thing we did with this training is kind of condensed it for people because we know that it's a long document and staff are given this document when they are first hired at WCLS to read and look over, but we know you know it's long. It's written in a very kind of like legalese way because it's written by the ALA. And so we really wanted to break that down and show people how this statement could apply to their everyday work lives.

Neil

So that's part of your training is to is to break down this. Tell me about your training. Now let's just move on to the training and talk about it. What happens at a Right to Read training?

Mary

Well, we based the training off of a training that was done by, remind me.

Emma

Their name is Tiffany Mautino with I think at that point they were with the Mid-Continent Public Library in Missouri and I saw at PLA, which is the Public Library Association. They do a conference every year. It was in Portland a few years ago and I attended a session that they put on that was called Horrible Evil Library Books, which was a really great title and it was a really popular session, obviously because book bans are on the rise across the country and librarians are concerned about what to do to it because one of our, you know, core values is to fight censorship.

And so after going to that training or not training at that point, it was the PLA session about how they had done this training for their entire staff. I think we were really inspired and we were like, how can we do that here?

Mary

So, what was great about this, you know, like Jonathan said, we didn't have to reinvent the wheel. There was already a really good training in place. So, we were fortunate that they let us, excuse me, attend one of their trainings virtually and see how it was done. And basically, we modeled ours after theirs.

So, there's, it's a 3-hour training and each hour has a particular topic. We present some, you know, basic overview information in the beginning of the hour and then we present a whole lot of real-world scenarios to our attendees and let them sort of talk out like what would I do? What would you do? What do you think about this? And then respond to those scenarios.

Neil

What kind of scenarios would that be?

Jonathan

One example of a scenario was you see a patron taking an item off of a display or a shelf and hiding it behind the bookshelf or under the bookshelf. And how do you respond? How do you have that conversation with the patron that you witnessed doing this behavior? But the interesting thing about bringing staff from all across the county and not just public service staff, but also administrative and custodians, you bring other perspectives to these experiences.

So, we had that situation where a custodian was in one of our trainings and we got to the scenario and they were just excited because it gave them a whole new framework for understanding what they see in their library. I find books underneath the shelf all the time. I didn't know that this was possibly somebody trying to hide something that they don't approve of or they don't appreciate trying to censor something and by the custodian going through this training, they know that this is something that they should probably mention to their supervisor and just pass that on. So, then staff during the day could be aware that maybe somebody is doing something with books in this area that they shouldn't be.

Neil

So that's a, that's one of the situations that occurs fairly frequently. People hiding a book that they don't want other people to see.

Jonathan

It can, yeah, it varies library to library but some people will be very vocal with challenging a book that they don't approve of or you know I talked to staff about it but other people. Are going to be much more passive about it and it might be simply, yeah trying to hide a book or maybe flipping books around that are on display so the backs are facing out instead of the covers. And these are situations that arise more so at other some branches than others.

But we want all of our staff to be familiar with the different types of ways that people challenge the freedom to read and how we can approach those and talk to staff or talk to patrons about these situations.

Neil

So, is there an appropriate way to challenge a book? I see a book on a shelf and I don't think it should be there.

Emma

I'd say come talk to us, having been through this training, conversation was a really big idea that we want us to have to come away with that. It doesn't have to just be a binary challenge or not to challenge. It can be starting a conversation about something and what we've learned is that people often just want to be heard and as librarians, we want to hear people too, right? Because we're librarians and we work for our communities. We are public servants. So, we do want to hear from people. But it's hard to respond to people if they're these passive challenges, right? If you're hiding a book somewhere, we don't have that opportunity to talk to you about maybe why that book is in the library in the first place or about some of these freedom to read goals that are at the core of librarianship.

Mary

And I think it's important to remember that, you know, we understand that not every book, not every item in the library, is for everybody. We fully know that, and actually if we're doing our jobs right, that's what it should look like. It should look like really wide range of things for all kinds of people for all ages. And you're not going to walk into one of our buildings and love everything. You know, I buy books for the collection, and I don't love everything that I buy. That's just the truth.

But part of having the freedom to read and the freedom to engage means we're going to have things on all kinds of topics. And so one of our goals as staff, you know, Hana is a youth services staff member. She wants to have conversations with folks and help people find stuff that's right for their family, right? Not everything is going to be right for their family, but Hana's trained to help you find something that is, so yeah, we want to talk to you about it? Yeah, absolutely.

Hana

We firmly believe, right? Not like Mary said not everything in the library is for everybody. But there is something in the library for everybody, and our job is to help you find that.

Mary

I mean, whether or not I agree with something is not a metric that, you know, factors into the decision to add something to the library collection or not. That's my own personal opinion is immaterial. I will say I sometimes will have a reaction to something that I'm considering buying and I will think, oh, I don't like that. But then I have to step back and separate myself from that and think, OK, what purpose does this serve? You know, we're serving the entire community. For my own library at home. I can curate my point of view, and I can have just one point of view if I want. But you know, we serve everybody in the county and lots of perspectives so, we need to have lots of things.

Emma

And that was one of our scenarios actually, you were asking about example scenarios for staff and one of those scenarios was, you know, someone brings a book to the counter that you don't like. I think in our example it was like a romance novel, you know, because who we are as readers is very different than who we are as librarians and library staff. And what I choose to read in my own time is not going to be what I'm always buying for the collection. So what we talked about in that scenario is training staff to not have a reaction because, you know, having that reaction and kind of, you know, acting in disgust when someone brings a book that you don't like that is actually violating intellectual freedom because that is then patrons losing trust in you and your ability to provide good library service.

Hana

And I think that is an angle of intellectual freedom that doesn't get thought about as intensely as the big concepts that we can convey a lot just by how we interact and respond with patrons. And it can be as simple as yes, I do not like this thing. I firmly and don't believe in this, but obviously we're going to provide it for you and it can be as, smaller as I just don't read this thing, but I will help you find it. I see that with families all the time. You know, I don't read the middle grade, the children's chapter books about sports, about people who play sports. But I know where they are and I can help you find them by sight. And I will gladly do so because hey you're reading.

Jonathan

All reading is good reading.

Mary

All reading is good reading.

Hana

All reading is good reading. Mary's mantra.

Neil

So you four are going to the Washington Library Association conference. And so you're making, you're presenting. So tell me what you're doing at the library at the WLA conference.

Emma

So WLA is a professional conference for librarians. This one is for library staff in Washington state and it's a really a chance for us to gather and hear about what librarians at different libraries are doing all across the state, from public libraries, academic libraries, school libraries. It's just a chance to share what we've learned. And what we're doing at our libraries, that's really cool and we want to show off. And so we're talking about the training that we did in case other libraries want to do something similar in their branches too.

Jonathan

In a sense, we're coming full circle because this was really inspired by a presentation that Emma went to very similar and we just feel like there's a lot that we learned from going through this process of developing our own version of this training and then rolling it out and process improvement over time as we had each session. It was a really valuable experience for us as we developed this training and kind of, yeah. The ongoing process improvement of it. So, there's a lot of positive outcomes and things that we want to share with other libraries if they're interested in taking on the same process.

Neil

That's the great thing about the library conferences that that we do attend is that sharing among other libraries just like in our library system, bringing people from different branches together on a larger scale, a conference will bring people from various libraries across the state or across the country if it's the American Library Association Conference together to and I think that one of the things that librarians do really well is listen and learn from each other.

Hana

Yeah.

Jonathan

We're kind of good at sharing information.

Emma

It's kind of our thing.

Jonathan

Kind of our thing.

Hana

It's almost like it's in our job description.

Mary

We're all about sharing.

Hana

Yeah, I think these types of events are chances to, excuse me, chances to learn from each other, but also just to meet each other and to get to know other people who do similar work across well in this case the state.

Jonathan

And you kind of can be in your own little world dealing with your own situations at your library and not aware that maybe the difficulty or the problem you're facing is something that others are also experiencing and yeah, WLA is a great chance for us to kind of crowdsource and learn from each other and grow as a library state wide.

(interlude music plays)

Mary

One thing I think maybe we didn't anticipate or I didn't anticipate was how much I would learn from staff. I mean often I think that's the case. I've been involved in these kind of training opportunities before and so I'm always open to that idea. But, I'm just really struck by our staff's commitment to the work that we do. I mean, you know, it's rough out there a little bit because we're trying to do, you know, more with less and we're trying to serve a really wide range of perspectives. We're trying to make sure that people have what they need, and sometimes the materials that we offer people have strong reactions to and that can, you know, be difficult to take on as a frontline staff.

But I'm just so impressed by the grace and the professionalism that our staff display and the way that they rise to meet the challenge, right? That they are so committed to what it is that we're trying to do, that they just consistently show up and present the best that we have to offer to our communities, which is really inspiring to me.

Hana

I think what this training also gave us and everybody in the system a chance to do was to have an outlet to maybe voice some concerns or thoughts or just anything about everything under this intellectual freedom umbrella that maybe they didn't even realize they were sitting with or holding on to, and it just it really gave us some wonderful information to talk about and to share with each other and to hopefully walk away feeling better about it.

Jonathan

I really appreciated this training's approach to how we framed these conversations. So much you hear in the news today with book challenges and book ban fights and things like that, it's so adversarial, right? It's some group or person fighting against the library. Or it's a board that's telling the library to do something, or some lawmakers passing some laws is going to restrict libraries, but it was really important for us to communicate to staff that this isn't an adversarial situation. We genuinely want to hear from our patrons, their thoughts, their feelings, their concerns, and we value that and we need to be open to listen and engage and hear people out and to provide information. And that's what we're all about, right? Provide information. Why a certain material is in our collection that they may not agree with and help them to understand what values guide us in making the decisions to having these items in our collection.

The library is for everyone and that's really important to us. And the more that we can communicate and help our patrons and throughout Whatcom County understand that. I think you'll value the library that much more when you realize yes, it's awesome that it has all the things that I want, but there's things for everyone here. Right. It's just a powerful thing about the library that we're here for everyone.

Emma

I think something that I really took away from these trainings was the different levels of staff and how they engaged with the training in just different ways. I mean, we talked about our public service assistants, they're the ones who are most often working at the desk and having these conversations. But Jonathan mentioned custodians, pages, so those are the people who are most likely shelving the books and honestly not talking to anybody, right? Sometimes pages come in, they shelve their books, they maybe talk to a couple of coworkers, and then they leave. And you might think that there aren't a lot of opportunities to engage with library values or intellectual freedom in that way, but what was really interesting was just getting to hear that, oh, these staff actually have a lot of really great thoughts about intellectual freedom, and they are engaging with this material every day,

even if they're not having these same conversations on the regular. So yeah, I just, I'm proud of my coworkers and I like where I work.

Mary

So, I was drawn to working in the library and became a librarian because I have a heart for access. I was a bookseller for many, many years, as Hana was too. I loved selling books, but I recognized that the exchange of funds was a real barrier to people and I wanted to stay in a world of sharing books, but I wanted that barrier to not be there and so 100% of the work that I do is guided by that heart for access. I want people to be able to participate in the culture and have the things that everybody is talking about and I don't want funds to be a barrier to that. So that's where I was coming from.

Emma

I became a librarian because I love learning and I love the idea of lifelong learning, and I almost became a teacher. But the thing about teachers is they work with a very small demographic, right? It's whatever age group you happen to be a teacher for, middle school, high school, college. But librarians work for all people of all ages in the community. And with intellectual freedom, we're really helping people learn whatever it is that they want to learn. We're more facilitators. We're not, you know, applying some educational metrics to people. We're really giving them the freedom to come in and explore whatever they want to explore.

Jonathan

Yeah. Well, I became a librarian for selfish reasons.

Mary

The glory right?

Jonathan

I got to a point in my life where I reflected on what I want to do, and I decided to go back to school. I didn't want to keep working a job that was just focused only on the bottom line. I wanted to do work that I felt benefited people in a different way than just the pocketbook of somebody that owns a company. So, I went back to school to become a librarian.

And yeah, I think, like Mary said, access is so important. I think what's great about the library is it's for everyone, it provides access, equal access to our resources. But even more than that when people hear library, they think of books. But really what I think is libraries are about the people. We're here not just to have books on our shelves, but we're here to allow people to access those books, to get the information they need. The library



isn't about the collection that you're browsing, but it's the conversations you have with patrons when they come up to the desk, it's when you sit down at a computer to help them with their question or to figure out how to do something online.

It's all those one-on-one interactions that you have to help people navigate the world and access the information they need and really provide that human touch and experience in that process. There's a lot of information you can get by just googling, but you don't get that human touch like you do when you talk to a librarian.

Hana

Hey, well, the reason that I became a librarian is going to sound very similar to what Mary said. I also started in bookstores. I actually worked at Village Books here in our own Whatcom County for six, almost seven years, starting in my early 20s and I moved into doing all the purchasing for the children's and youth materials there and that passion for children's literature drew me to that work and much like Mary, I saw the barrier that comes when there's a monetary exchange. Obviously, we love independent bookstores. And we need independent bookstores, but we also need an environment for people who don't have the or don't have to exchange money for the information and the materials and the services.

So I took a break from working after my son was born and when it was time for me to go back because I had the itch to be doing something for myself, I looked to libraries and that seemed like an obvious transition to me and I came here to WCLS and I'm still specializing in children's services because that's what I really wanted to do in the first place, so now not only can I send a kid away with a whole pile of graphic novels instead of having to choose just one because they're expensive. I also get to do things like run the story times and just put families in touch with everything that the library has to offer for no cost. And I found myself very passionate about things like early literacy on this journey.

Mary

I think for me, intellectual freedom is right at the center of my desire to be, you know, involved as a librarian, you know, I think we are stronger as a society when we have the ability to explore points of view with which we agree and those with which we do not. We are stronger when we're not in an echo chamber and the library allows you to get out of your echo chamber and learn about ideas that push you and challenge you and make you think and in being able to offer this training to our staff, being able to help them facilitate that experience for patrons every day like that's at the heart of what librarianship should be for me.

(interlude music plays)

Neil

OK. One last thing, quick, speedy, book recommendations, anybody?

Emma

I just finished *Orbital*. I can't remember the author right now.

Mary

Samantha Harvey.

Emma

Samantha Harvey. It won the Booker. So this is kind of like an old news book recommendation. But I just finished reading it and it's just really lovely. I love a short book, but it was short and just it's about astronauts who live and work up on the International Space. And it takes place over the course of the day and the many, many orbits that they go around Earth. And it's just really beautiful. And it made me just appreciate our Earth.

Mary

I cannot stop raving about a book called *The Names* by Florence Knapp, which is out in May, and it is literary fiction that really asks the question can a different name change the course of somebody's life? So, very thought provoking and deep and actually would be really perfect to read with your book club.

Hana

I just finished a children's chapter book called *Wills Race for Home* by Jewell Parker Rhodes and it is a historical fiction that centers around the Oklahoma Land Rush, which honestly I did not know much about and now, thanks to Jewell Parker Rhodes, I can tell you some things about it. And it centers around a black family that has their own land post the Emancipation Proclamation, but they live on land where they're sharecropping. And then they hear about the Oklahoma Land Rush and Will is our protagonist. He's about 12 and it's about their journey to try to claim a piece of that land entirely for themselves and to have a home.

Jonathan

I just finished a book called *The Stardust Grail* by...

Emma

I also finished that I loved it and. I reviewed it.

Jonathan

And I really enjoyed it. Short description. It's like space Indiana Jones. It's kind of.

Emma

I think I described it in my review as Becky Chambers meets Indiana Jones, yeah.

Jonathan

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it was fun. And I really enjoyed the last quarter of it when it kind of gets a little more dicey and intense, a little more.

Emma

Gets a little more feisty.

Jonathan

Yeah. So the *Stardust Grail*, it was a fun read.

Neil

OK. All right. Well, I don't want to take any more of your time. Thank you guys so much for sitting down with me and talking about the right to read trainings and congratulations on your award. I wish I could come down and cheer you on at WLA this year.

Mary

Thank you.

Hana

Thanks Neil.

Emma

Thank you, Neil. Always fun chatting with you.

(interlude music plays)

Neil

Well, that's our show. I'd like to thank our guests. Mary Kinser, Emma Radosevich, Hana Boxberger and Jonathan Jakobitz for that illuminating conversation about intellectual freedom and the right to read. Visit our website to find out more in our show notes at [wcls.org/podcast](http://wcls.org/podcast). And a big thanks goes out to my boss, Mary Vermillion. She's always there when we need her. And thank you, dear listeners, I hope you're enjoying the podcast and enjoying all the things that your libraries offer. Take care, my friends.