

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's bicentennial celebration, the U of M Library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of the people who make up the University's rich history. The Ann Arbor District Library has garnered a national reputation as being an innovative leader. In addition to books, users can check out tools, such as telescopes, and sewing machines, and the library's many partnerships with U of M have helped connect the larger Ann Arbor community to just what's happening on campus. For our latest installment of StoryCorps, U of M librarian Emily Puckett Rodgers sat down with her mentor, Josie Parker, to discuss the crucial role public libraries are playing in our changing world. Parker is the director of the Ann Arbor District Library, and they are both alums of U of M's School of Information.

Emily Puckett Rodgers: I think from my perspective, you do recognize and listen to people and hear people out from their ideas and you say, "Let's explore this together," and so that's something to me that I found compelling and interesting. Do you have any memories of somebody who kind of brought an idea to you? Or there was an opportunity that you saw, that struck you or how you thought about that, and how you approached that, specifically. Anything that ...

Josie Parker: I think one that has maintained over the years is the countywide read program, where everyone in the community, not only the library community or the U community, but the county reads a book. And the University was very involved in that, when it first began, and it turns out that the books that are selected, and this is going on now 14 years I believe, are almost always nonfiction titles. Not always, but almost, and they draw hundreds of people to the events around the titles, and their authors come here. So that by itself was a really great indication of just how successful a partnership can be with entities that don't bear a lot of similarity in terms of size or budget or assets, or human resources. So it let the tiny libraries around the county be at a par with the University, and that makes a lot of sense to the person who goes in and out of the library checking out books, right? I think that was a great example and I learned early on, if you ask, most people are willing to start to try something with you in this community, so it makes it easy.

There are so many others though, I think we have so many great partnerships that bring people to us and bring people together. For me that's what it's about, it's about people being in the same space enjoying something or learning something together and then they have this opportunity afterward to look at each other and have that moment of, aha! And who else is in this room? What other points of view are presented here? I think the bringing people together is *the* thing we do as a public library in this community that is what I'm super proud of.

Emily Puckett Rodgers: Yeah that reminds me of experiences I've had as a quote unquote academic librarian, somebody who works in the University of Michigan Library, when we were participating in some of those activities, we see ourselves as a public

library, in a way, we're academic but we let people come into our buildings and use the resources. But those opportunities that we had, where we were out in the community, really challenged our conception of ourselves and it actually made us realize that some of the resources that we thought were freely and more openly available were not. We learned a lot from your approach of not having to tie everything directly to a resource that we have, or an academic outcome and that kind of thing.

Josie Parker: Right.

Emily Puckett Rodgers: And we also were able to say, "Yes this is what we can provide to the community in these ways," and it really was a powerful moment of self reflection, of a mirror in a way. We've had conversations like that before, about what librarianship is, or libraries are, and you never seem to be stopped by what ifs or how can we, or yes and. That's something it sounds like was seated at the School of Information in one respect. But what are some other examples of how you haven't been stopped or stymied by the overbearing aspects of librarianship or that kind of thing?

Josie Parker: I think that, I will say that the education at the School of Information, the education to become a librarian, is a huge part of the kind of librarian I am. The part of me that says, "Wait a minute, don't tell me no, don't tell me I can't," that comes from an upbringing. That comes from a culture and a way of life. The thing about the public library part of it is, it's public. So we serve the folks who pay the money to run the library and we can't forget that. At the same time, we service *all* of the folks who pay the taxes to run the library, not the readers only or the book club only or the people who don't want computers in the library or the people who tell me that children shouldn't be in the library. There are people who say that. We are not there only for that point of view, we are there for all. Somehow in all of that, we have to find a way to do it. We looked at how we designed our spaces, we built buildings that were inclusive, that were welcoming in their design, for all comers.

The other thing we've done is we tried things that public libraries haven't tried. One of those things is Pulp, where we have taken a situation where there's not local media now in this community that reports on arts and culture. And when we did have a newspaper here, that was a big part of that newspaper's work, and a valued one and one that people came to rely on and counted on. So when it left, when it disappeared, there's this void. The public library staff talk to me about this, I knew it would be something that would raise a lot of eyebrows. Here's this public library that thinks it can report and publish about arts and culture, like really? So there was some pushback, there still is, but we're doing it and it's getting traction. We're doing it very well and it's professionally done and it's not a game to us. We just go about it.

Emily Puckett Rodgers: Right.

Josie Parker: If it doesn't work, it doesn't work.

Emily Puckett Rodgers: Right.

Josie Parker: But if it does, look, what else comes next? What can happen from this?

Emily Puckett Rodgers: Right, absolutely. That reminds me of some examples of building out the electronic music collection that you have, you take kind of some of these core concepts of what a library is or can do or has done historically with collection building, or even the archives of taking the news archives, partnering with the University Library to make sure that those are available. But also, you take it a next step up with the engagement, with the relevancy, with things like Pulp. So to me those are examples of the opportunity that you talk about, of taking what you're doing not being afraid to explore that, but also feeling confident in the staff and the capacity that you had just mentioned, the professionalism of what you do.

Josie Parker: The tools, the unusual stuff is what it started out being called. Now it's tools, music tools, science tools, art tools, and so many other things. When I'm challenged about that, the justification for it is not mine, it's one that began with Andrew Carnegie. The whole notion of public libraries and having books available to the general public, was because books were very expensive. And only wealthy people could afford to have them. He felt that needed to be changed. So he went about changing it and he spent millions and millions of dollars over a time period, building libraries and filling them up with books. The tool's collection represents those expensive things that a person might not be able to buy, and maybe they don't want to buy it because they're only going to use it once. They need the telescope for something special happening, and they want to take their kids out in the country and look at the stars. The sewing machine, who knows. Maybe they start to learn to sew, think they're going to love it and don't and aren't they glad they didn't purchase a sewing machine. So we're doing it, it's the same thing. We're taking things that are expensive, that not everyone can afford, and not necessarily doesn't need to buy, and the library has it.

The folks who challenged me on the tool's collection were guess who? Our librarian friends. It was so interesting, from around the country. My public, my users are throwing me ideas. They're not saying, "What is this about? Why are you doing this?" So now I don't have to, I don't have to bring the ideas forward, other people do. It's great. That's what the point is. We get caught up in that in libraries, we look around and we go, "Oh we've got to do it the way this library does it, oh we've got to do it this way." No, no no, you know? No. Do what works for you, do what works in your community and don't pay it ... you can look around and you can take some good ideas, but it's not about benchmarking and being just like the next library.

Speaker 1:

That was U of M librarian Emily Puckett Rodgers talking with Josie Parker, the director of the Ann Arbor District Library. These interviews are recorded by StoryCorps, www.storycoprs.org. For more from the series, visit arts.umich.edu/storycorps.