

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHAMPAIGN PUBLIC LIBRARY

You ask what a typical day is like working at the Champaign Public Library? In Children's Services, it's brilliant, giggling, calm, stimulating, tearful, satisfying—and never long enough. But I'm guessing you'd like more specific detail than that, so here's a glimpse of library life on a Wednesday in mid-July 2008.

I'm lucky enough to live half a mile from the library, so I walk to work. Sometimes I catch sight of Betsy Su, Trina Howard, or Kristin Hungerford who also walk, or Melissa Records waves as she sails past on her bicycle. But this morning I was the early person for my department and didn't see any co-workers along the way.

A red light at the corner of State and Green Streets gave me a chance to stop and look across at our new building. That whole city block has gone through an amazing metamorphosis over the last three years. I wonder when I'll become so blasé about the results that I don't stand and gawk.

Landscapers were planting the last perennials, shrubs, and trees around the parking lot when I passed. We had so much rain this season that some of the work was delayed, but it's shaping up to be a good-looking parking lot. Give the trees a few years to start spreading their shade and it will be one of the greenest patches of asphalt in town.

The landscaping on the west side of the building is my favorite, though. I love the sketch of tall grasses and bit of swale outside the children's windows. The poplar saplings along the sidewalk there are only 15 or 20 feet tall, but a century from now they should be towering, great-grandparent trees.

Around the back of the building, a familiar recorded voice greeted the driver of an SUV at the automated book return. "Thank you for using the Champaign Public Library. The door will close ...." I passed the Bookmobile parked at the loading dock and held my purse up to the detector box on the wall. The box sensed the proxy key in my purse, chirped, and unlocked the back door for me. Magic.

Shelvers were already sorting carts of books and DVDs when I passed through the Circulation Services workroom. They're forever busy.

The children's workroom was still dark, but motion sensors turned the lights on as I stepped inside. I powered up the printer and copier on my way around the cubicle island to the area Betsy Shea and I share: two desks, two chairs, two computers, two telephones, two sets of overhead shelves. It's an ark of office equipment.

After pushing its buttons, my computer and I went through our startup routines together. Lanyard with proxy key around the neck; screen flashing; nametag pinned to shirt; password requested; electronic time sheet filled out; virtual in/out marker slid to “in.”

8:30 a.m. and time to make the children’s department ready for business. In the half hour before the doors open, this is what I raced to do: turn on the catalog computers; turn on the desk computers and the self-check computer; log in to each and launch Horizon (the electronic catalog of our holdings); turn on the monitors for the Internet computers; turn on the colored lights that make the glass front of the children’s service desk glow and beckon (This morning I punched in the shifting color wave, one of twelve patterns to choose from.); straighten every shelf that needs it.

It’s actually not possible to straighten every shelf that needs it before we open at 9 o’clock, but that doesn’t stop anyone from trying. Trina performed a similar ballet in the TeenSpace. Jean Flood rolled past with a cart of DVDs. Eric Teague waltzed through with his vacuum cleaner. Brianna swirled out of one family restroom with her cleaning cart and into the next. Upstairs, in Adult Services, the choreography was identical.

Just before 9 a.m., Kristin, Betsy, and our department manager, Stephanie Edwards, arrived. Phones honked in the distance as they were reset so that callers would reach live librarians instead of the overnight recorded message. Betsy joined me at the children’s desk for the morning shift. Kristin picked up the keys for the Nate & Lillie Story Room to prepare for her *Storyshop* program. We breathed, customers streamed in, the phone rang, and the public part of our day began.

“Good morning, Champaign Public Library, this is Betsy, how may I help you?”

“Will you read me a poem?”

“Sure I will. Today’s poem is by Jack Prelutsky and it’s called ‘As Soon as Fred Gets out of Bed.’”

While Betsy read about Fred putting his underwear on his head, a boy of about nine walked up to the desk. “I’m looking for a book,” he told me. “It’s green.” A few questions prompted enough information for a combined keyword search in the catalog and before long we found his book on the shelf. The book itself wasn’t green, but green was in the title—*The Children of Green Knowe* by L.M. Boston.

Preschoolers started arriving for the first *Storyshop* session. A baby toddling in with her mother stopped and gurgled when she saw our desk lights shift from blue to green and on through yellow, orange, red,

and purple. “Mm, mm, mm,” she said, and, unable to contain her joy, she embraced the desk and licked it. As soon as she and her mother disappeared around the corner into the Discovery Area, Betsy grabbed a bottle of environmentally friendly cleaner and washed the glass.

We have *Storyshop* twice on Wednesday mornings, at 9:45 and again at 10:30. Today Kristin read stories and sang songs about farm animals, getting the kids up and moving with “The Barnyard Stomp.” She also played her guitar, which the children love. She had 34 children and adults in the first program and 29 in the second.

In between programs, Betsy and I waded through a sea of two-, three-, and four-year-olds excited about signing up for our Summer Reading Game—or reporting their progress. So far, at the Main Library, we have just over 3,700 kids registered for SRG this year; that’s 600 more than last year. Stephanie came out from the workroom to give us a hand with the crowd and stayed to give us morning breaks.

Before heading up to the staff lounge on the third floor, I stopped back in our workroom and grabbed the outgoing mail. Danotra Boyd was singing along with her iPod and sorting books for the Bookmobile at her desk when I passed through Circulation again. Sheri Daley was dealing with problem DVDs and CDs while Laura Weis patiently explained our overdue policy to someone on the phone. A volunteer was getting ready to hunt down items that patrons had asked to have held for pick-up.

The back stairwell is a good place to wave hello in passing. I see people from other departments trotting up and down the stairs that I otherwise might not see for days or weeks in this vast new building (it’s three times bigger than what we had before).

Trina was in the mailroom working on interlibrary loans—items traveling to and from other libraries. “Hey, hon, how’s it going?” she asked. Trina always has a cheerful word. She’s also a terrific cook. Sometimes she brings in her experimental creations for a taste test.

I love the view from the lounge, where you can see all the way to the university. When the new library opened, we could see Altgeld Hall and the Illini Union on campus. Today I counted four large cranes working on a variety of construction projects. Two new high-rise apartment buildings will dwarf everything in sight. One of them already took away our view of Altgeld and the Union.

The lounge is another good place to bump into people. Paula Van De Wyngaerde and Sue Haley from Technical Services were there this morning. Paula has worked at the library since it was in the old Burnham Athenaeum building on Church Street, and all those years in

the building on South Randolph where our parking lot is now. Paula and Essie Harris, manager of our Douglass Branch Library, are the last of the library “Old Timers,” as they call themselves.

As Paula and Sue were leaving, Ester Burke and Linda Larson from Adult Services came in along with Nanette Donohue, manager of Technical Services. Nanette and Ester both play flute in the Community Band that has concerts on the university quad each summer.

There are two soft drink vending machines in the lounge selling Pepsi and Coca Cola products, including bottled water. Another machine has a variety of candy, chips, cookies, and other snacks for sale. There’s also a refrigerator so people who bring their lunches can keep them cold. I like to have a glass of ice water, getting ice cubes from the dispenser in the fridge door and water from the tap. Before my twenty-minute break was over, I stepped down the hall to say “hi” to Jill Bouvet and Susan Lerner in the reception office.

Back at the children’s desk, Stephanie was filling a teacher’s phoned-in request for a stack of books about ocean animals for a class of four- and five-year-olds. Betsy was helping Emerson Urban find Spiderman books. Emerson is four. He and his older sisters, Colleen and Liberty, and his brother, Sean, come to the library with their parents several times a week, all year round, usually walking or riding their bikes. They’re part of the growing home schooling community in Champaign.

Betsy went on her break, headed in the direction of Latté Da, the library’s new café, and a cup of chai tea latte. Cafés are popular at public libraries these days, and the staff likes ours as much as the public does.

Our library director, Marsha Grove, came by with a group of librarians visiting from Bloomington. They loved our desk lights, though they didn’t show it as exuberantly as that baby earlier in the day.

The rest of the morning passed quickly with the usual range of questions. “Where’s the bathroom?” “Is there an elevator?” “Do you have a list of library programs?” “Do you have *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*?” “Can you recommend a good book for a fifth grader?” “I can really check out 200 books if I want?”

Betsy and I took turns walking around the department picking up stray books, checking to see if anyone needed help, and turning books face out on the shelves where there were empty spaces. On one of my “walkabouts,” I saw two children sitting side by side in one of our big red chairs, heads bent together over a picture book. Several adults typed away on their laptops, coffee from the café at their elbows. As I passed groups of children and parents in conversation, I heard all kinds of

languages and accents. Sometimes we ask our native Spanish speaker, Maricela Arce, to translate, so we can be more helpful to Spanish-speaking families.

About noon it started to rain. Even with the darkening skies, there was plenty of light coming in through all our windows and skylight. The sound of the rain on the skylight was wonderful.

A bit about Children's Services: We divide the day into three shifts, with two people working the desk in each time slot. A third person joins in during the busiest part of the afternoon, from 3 to 5:30 p.m. When we're not at the desk, we're planning or preparing programs, ordering books, checking the condition of the collection, de-accessioning discarded books, checking in newly arrived books, straightening shelves, creating book lists, or doing any number of other tasks. When we're fully staffed, we have four full-time MLS librarians, three full-time support staff, and two part-time support staff.

Mike Rogalla and Becky Allen came on the desk at 1 p.m. It was still raining. In fact it was pouring. Ordinarily I walk home for lunch, but today the café seemed like a good alternative. My sister, Cam, also works at the library and today our schedules intersected. That doesn't happen often, so we celebrated by splitting a roast beef and cheddar sandwich on ciabatta—and a giant chocolate chip cookie.

Cam is part of the desk staff in Circulation. I often hear her teaching customers to use the self-check machines at the checkout counter, but she spends much of her time in the sorting room in the basement. She's one of the people who keep an eye on the conveyer belt where returned items come in from our two book returns for automatic check-in and sorting.

I spent some of my afternoon hours processing a cart of new books that Rebecca Knaur brought down from Technical Services. She brings carts several times a week. It's my job to check in the department's new materials and shelve them. Today's cart was a mix of picture books and juvenile fiction. I checked them in at the computer in our workroom dedicated to that task, opening each book and scanning the barcode on the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tag inside the back cover with the hand-held laser scanner. Then I rolled the cart out to the new book shelves and arranged them. I like to put the newest books face out for maximum exposure. As I go, I make sure the other books are in proper order. We have lots of "help" re-shelving books from browsing children.

While I was shelving, several children hopped past in an impromptu game of carpet square hopscotch. Becky went past with a

small boy on a hunt for dinosaur books. She went past again, a few minutes later, with a procession of little girls in pink and purple looking for princess books. “Oh, and fairy books, too,” one of the girls remembered. Two children left in tears because they wanted to stay and play longer in our Discovery Area with the Lego table and puppet theater. One child got a paper cut. Mike put a Scooby-Doo bandage on it and that made it all better.

On my afternoon break, I took the opportunity to go upstairs to Adult Services. They have fifty computers with Internet access for adult users. I checked my e-mail, found a Bill Crider mystery I hadn’t read, and sat for awhile by a window looking out over State Street to the lovely Solon House. It was built around 1869, about the time the city of Champaign got its first reading room, the predecessor to the public library. The house is for sale and everyone hopes a buyer will come along and preserve it.

Back in the children’s workroom, I started in on the department’s monthly statistics. We count everything: reference questions, directional questions, phone calls, computer usage, programs, and attendance at programs. The numbers go on and on, and they tell an interesting story every month. We’re an extremely busy library!

Karin Green and Ginny O’Brien were in the workroom. They were scheduled for the evening shift, so they had the afternoon off-desk, as we say. While I entered numbers in an Excel spreadsheet on my computer, I listened to them changing the words to a song to reflect our changing times, in particular, four-dollar-a-gallon gasoline. So, in place of a big red truck and a Ferrari, they celebrated a bicycle, Mini Cooper, and the increasingly popular gas/electric hybrid:

*A bicycle, a bicycle  
Mini, Mini, Mini and a bicycle  
A bicycle, a bicycle  
Mini, Mini, Mini and a bicycle  
A HYBRID! A HYBRID!  
Mini, Mini, Mini and a bicycle  
A HYBRID! A HYBRID!  
Mini, Mini, Mini and a bicycle*

At some point during the afternoon, the rain stopped. Because I had come in at 8:30 in the morning, I got to leave at 5 p.m. As I stepped outside, the sky was blue again and the air was fresh. Customers were still streaming in the doors—about 2,000 come every day now. They would keep coming right up until closing time at 9 o’clock tonight, and they will be here again, waiting at the door, at 9 a.m. tomorrow. •