

Kate Wise

LI 801 Interview Paper

Patricia Heidrick, Director of Port Library, Beloit, KS

Date of interview: September 18, 2006

The Port Library in Beloit, Kansas, is a unique public library in a small town in north central Kansas. The library building is a house built by Mrs. Emma Port, who planned for it eventually to be the library. While there is a modern addition of the periodical and reading room, the rest of the collection resides in built-in and freestanding bookshelves in the three levels of the house. Mrs. Heidrick's office is at the back of the first floor. I sat down with her in her office shortly before lunch to learn about being director of such a charismatic public library in the small town of Beloit. The following is a condensation of our conversation.

**How did you enter the profession?**

“My mother worked for special services as a librarian through the military, and never in a million years did I imagine myself doing something similar. When I went to college, I got a degree in modern languages. I married and moved to Kansas City, Missouri, and was looking for a job. I couldn't find anything translating, so I took a job at the public library in Kansas City, Missouri downtown. I really loved it. I stayed there for four or five years, and we moved to Beloit. I wasn't looking for employment, but it came looking for me instead. An acquaintance of mine was on the library board here, and knew that I had worked in libraries, and said, “Would you come and help us out, our person is leaving”. So, I came just to help out, and I stayed. And I've enjoyed it very much.”

**Why did you choose a public library?**

“My first love was languages, which in itself was kind of literature-based. I grew up in a family that read a lot, so it wasn’t too big a stretch for me to go that direction. I enjoyed working with people; and if I had my druthers, reference would really be my focus. In Kansas City, I worked in what was then the Business and Technical department, and we did a lot of reference searches, and lot of work with government documents.”

**What are the major responsibilities in this job?**

“It’s a little different in a small library than in a metropolitan library. Presently, in my role of the director, I am responsible for the personnel. I also am responsible to be the liaison with the trustees. The other responsibility that is essentially mine is the development of the book collection. I have a lot of input from the staff. Rachel [the children’s services director] reads a lot of reviews for example; so it’s not like I’m doing it in a vacuum. But, the ultimate decision is mine. Otherwise, I clean up the spills on the floor, and take care of the toilet when it overflows.”

**Do you set the policy?**

“No, the board sets that. We suggest, we tweak it, review it with their input, but they set the policy. They may come up with questions that we choose to develop a policy [around]. Not too long ago, there was some question about posting the building for no trespassing. We have not had any problems with that, but I know that it’s not good practice to come up with policy that’s in direct response to a particular situation. I worked the police department and the city administrator to see what kinds of things there were in place that already covered us. We did find out that there was some language that we could use for small signs displayed someplace where a patron would see it. That lead to the development of a policy about the building itself. Sometimes there are issues; the legislature might make some decision that would ultimately

affect us. No child left behind did that, the children's protection law with [relation to] internet use – those kinds of things can sometimes derive policy.”

**Do you belong to any professional organizations or groups?**

“Sure do. KLA and ALA.”

**Do you do a lot with them?**

“Not so much in ALA, but I have been secretary of KLA, and on different committees for KLA. In Kansas, we're divided up into library systems. Mitchell County is a part of the Central Kansas Library System, so I've had evolving involvement with them. There was a segment of about 8 years when I was not working, and during that time I sat on and ultimately chaired the system board. I've worked with the state library on various committees. I think it's good [to be involved with organizations], but be choosy on what you do. You can be sucked into things sometimes that are not terrific. Do your homework, as with any group you would [join].

**What ethical or policy issues are most important to you?**

The first one of course that I think of would be the privacy issues where our patrons are concerned. I believe it is a little trickier in a small town, because you tend to know personally many of the patrons that come in. It would be easy for us to deduce who's pregnant, who's considering changing their relationships, who's thinking about buying a new house, who's maybe thinking about getting into some kind of business, who's thinking about going back to school, based on the kinds of things they check out.

Other issues have to do with students. Sometimes students will say things here that need to stay here. However, sometimes there are things that students will say that do need to be brought to other people. A middle teen girl came in quite a bit, and began to talk quite a bit to me. Over the space of several months, I could tell that there was something going on not good.

Should I leave it here, or did it require my saying something to somebody else? I think sometimes there are issues like that that come up, and you have to make some decisions.

Censorship is another issue. I think there are several things that you have to know. You have to know your community, number one. What do they tolerate in relation to what they want in their collection? What's available, and what is your policy? If your policy already precludes putting something in the collection that would touch on an issue, then no matter what your personal beliefs are, you have to work with the policy. We are employees of a particular place, and that policy rules what you do. If you say to yourself I can't do that, then you either have to leave the institution, leave the collection development to somebody else, or bring to your board the possibility of changing the policy. Over time, literature itself has changed so much that what we think of as normal, when I was in high school probably would have curled my hair. People's expectations of literature have changed."

**What is your relationship with the patrons (as director)?**

I think my relationship with people as the director in this library is different from it would be in Salina or somewhere else. From my experience at Kansas City, even as a staffer, we didn't see the director that much. Here, I don't see the patrons as much as I would like to either. But, I do have opportunities, and I do work the desk. People know me by name. Some people will call or come in and only want me to help them. It's not unusual at the grocery store for some small child to say, "Oh, there's the library lady," or at church, some body might avoid me because they happen to have an overdue book – they know that I know that, even though I might not. There aren't too many things about libraries that negative. It's a pretty positive, non-threatening place. So, by consequence, the staff and I have that pretty positive relationship with most people."

After we had covered the questions included in the assignment, our conversation ranged from topics like budgets for small town libraries, the emerging blu-ray technology and its impact on the world of entertainment media, dealing with library boards, networking with other librarians, and working with staff or other library directors who are largely untrained in library information sciences. Certainly, budgets are a large concern to smaller libraries, especially with the rising cost of materials. She shared her reluctance to invest in a large media collection until a dominant technology emerged. We talked at length about the three major tasks for the board of a small library; hiring the library director, setting library policy, and approving a library budget. She shared her work in mentoring untrained library personnel.

Mrs. Heidrick is very enthusiastic about her position as the director of a small town public library, and was pleased to share that love with me. She honestly discussed issues, conflicts, and difficulties with the position, yet she also glowingly described the positive points of the job. I learned much about the unique policy and ethical issues facing a smaller library, as well as learning much about the distinctive flavor of the Port library. Leaving the interview, I found myself hoping to find a position in my career that I enjoyed as much as Mrs. Heidrick enjoyed her position.