

HainesRenee_20210615

KIMBERLY KRATZ: Wow. I have never heard that before.

(inaudible)

RENEE HAINES: That's exciting.

KK: That is exciting. So my name is Kimberly Kratz, I'm a reference librarian at Allentown Public Library. And this is Renee Haines. She is the director at Allentown Public Library. And so welcome, Renee.

RH: Thank you.

KK: And thank you for taking the time to do this out of your busy day. So please, if you wouldn't mind in the beginning, just spell out your first and last names for me, please.

RH: Sure. My first name is Renee, R-E-N-E-E, and my last name is Haines, H-A-I-N-E-S. Great, thank you. Renee, could you please give a description a little bit about your role as director at Allentown Public Library?

RH: Sure. Being a library director is a little bit different than being a regular librarian; [00:01:00] I always joke that I'm the paper pusher, and not necessarily the people person anymore. But I do have occasions to still speak to

library users. But my role is to work with the board to create a budget and oversee the general operations, and make sure that we are providing the best service that we can within the library, and also out in the community. I oversee staff, I make sure that our maintenance department is running smoothly. It's just a lot of general management stuff, I guess.

KK: Yeah. Thanks for that. So we're going to be talking a little bit about the COVID-19 pandemic, and I just want to get a little bit of an idea, going back to sort of the beginnings of the pandemic, what were your impressions from media coverage, and [00:02:00] also from your contacts before the COVID-19 cases started happening in the U.S.? Just what was your general sense?

RH: Well, it seemed so far away, you know, when you think about where it started, and how it moved across Europe. I knew it was a matter of time before it got to us, but it still seemed, I don't know, almost -- I don't want to say impossible, but it just seemed unlikely. And as things started changing in the US, you know, I thought, okay, well maybe just not here in our community. But eventually, you know, it spread to the state and it spread to our

community, and things really changed. I think early on, even at the beginning of the lockdown when the library had to close, it still felt sort of surreal, and not really -- it was hard to imagine that it was really here.

KK: At what point [00:03:00] did you kind of come to a realization that things were going to be different?

RH: I would have to say probably -- you know, and we were closed for months, so, you know, you would think from day one of that point. But it really wasn't. I would have to say probably three or four weeks in, when it seemed to be never ending, you know. We thought we'd be closed for a week or two, and that might be it. And, you know, three or four weeks in, suddenly March turned to April, and April started turning into May, soon after that, I think that's when I realized that, hey, this isn't normal, and things might be different. When we came back, it was a whole new world.

KK: Describe some of -- and I know there's a lot of ups and downs, but just describe a little bit about sort of some of what you went through, your thoughts and emotions as you kind of navigated those first several months.

RH: You know, I felt a lot [00:04:00] of things; fear -- not fear for my personal safety, but just fear for the organization, fear for the community, fear for the country at large, because early on, things were really running rampant through the country, and it was a little frightening. Guilt, because as a librarian, you know, we just -- we live to serve. I know it sounds crazy to say, but it's true. And I think worrying that we weren't doing enough for the community or what we could do or what we couldn't do for the community, so there was a lot of guilt involved with that. And really, just uncertainty all around. You know, we had to create policies and procedures, we had to follow CDC guidelines, state guidelines. You know, all of these things were so new to us. So I think we learned a lot, I [00:05:00] learned a lot. We all, I think as a group, the staff, I have to say, did a really great job being just open-minded and easily adapted to all of this change. So that -- there was a little bit of excitement there, because I saw the best in people, you know, maybe even people who were just always lurking there at the surface, but we never saw it as a group. Suddenly we saw it, because I think everybody

really pulled together in a positive way. So there was a little bit of good in the end.

KK: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I'd have to agree with that, too.

(laughter) So as a public institution, the library, of course, is subject to these mandates of the government, and obviously the CDC guidelines. What was the progression of the shutdown and reopening? I should also -- I probably should have prefaced this whole thing by saying this is June 15th, 2021. [00:06:00]

RH: Yes.

KK: So hopefully we're kind of nearing the end. But just, what was that progression of the shutdown-slash-reopening?

RH: Well, it was all pretty quick. And that sort of took us by surprise. You know, there was talk, there was talk at the state level, there was a lot going on in the governor's office, there was a lot going on in the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, who is our kind of governing body at the state level. And it was a Friday, if I recall, and it was after 5:00 (laughter) that the decision was finally made that public libraries had to shut down. At that point, I think they had already shut down schools, or within a day or two before they had shut down schools. And

that was, what, the second or third week of March of 2020. So I think our official close date was March 14th. That was a Saturday. So we closed for that Saturday, and we were [00:07:00] closed until, I would say, was it June 8th? June 8th we brought stuff back for a week, before we opened for curbside service. Then following that, we were closed to the public, the building was closed to the public for two weeks, but we provided curbside service through our drive-through window on 12th Street. Then in the beginning of July, 2020, we opened again to the public. And we managed to stay open, except for one little blip in December, where we had some COVID cases, or possible COVID cases among the staff, and so we closed for two or three days -- three days, I believe. We have come back, though, with limited hours. And we haven't changed those just yet, because we still haven't seen, at this point in June of 2021, we still haven't seen the pattern of usage go back to its fullest potential. I really think that it's taking [00:08:00] people a long time to go back to their regular routines, and just feel comfortable in large public spaces, and we do have a large public space. So we're not open as many evenings a week, we have limited hours on a Saturday.

We are available in all spaces for browsing. But we do still, as you know, carry on with programming virtually. Hopefully this summer, with kids, we'll be able to have some things in person, too.

KK: Gotcha. And can you talk a little bit about some of the services that we were able, aside from the curbside, that we were able to provide during the shutdown portions?

RH: Sure. Actually, it's been really great. And you, of all people, were one of those individuals that really drove the change. We hadn't at that point -- I mean, you know, we hadn't at that point, we hadn't done anything virtually. We never tried virtual [00:09:00] programming. Suddenly here's this new horizon, and there we are. And you're out there with your coworkers in adult services doing virtual programming, so we were able to offer things like Socrates Café and Book Group, and Storytime, and Wellness Series, and things like that, to the public in the comfort of their own home, which was really cool. And right before COVID started, like within three or four months before COVID started, we had started a subscription to Hoopla, which is an online streaming service, as you know. It's been really a godsend, because for as much as we had patrons who used

those online books that we had already had available through OverDrive, online ebooks, e-audiobooks. To add this service was just a happy accident, that suddenly we were able to provide library materials online to patrons from [00:10:00] home, so even when we weren't here, they were still able to use our resources. And the other thing that we did, it was kind of an on-the-fly situation, was that we started providing library cards online. And that was something that we had talked about off and on, but we had never really moved forward with the process. So we managed to streamline it between when we started last April and now. Now we're still providing library cards to users through an online web form, so that's really great, too. And we've made other changes since then, you know, our web page has been updated, so that really makes a tremendous difference as well. But just -- I think being able to still connect with people, even if it's virtual, is really a new concept for us at Allentown Public Library. And you know, maybe not in the library community at large, but for us. And I think that really was a [00:11:00] big change.

KK: Yeah, I'd agree with you there, for sure. Are there any particular aspects of your job that really demanded more

focus during the pandemic that maybe were not, like, the forefront prior to the pandemic?

RH: Well, creating all that policy. I mean, not that we don't -- you know, I work with the board -- we're actually -- the irony was in 2020, we had made the decision that we were going to update policies, look at things that might have needed renewal, or things that just needed a check. So creating all this new policy was an exciting thing, too. So that really demanded a great deal of time, trying to sort out new patterns for how to deal with materials. That took time. Usually I'm not quite as hands-on with the check-in and check-out process, as [00:12:00] perhaps our circulations supervisor might be, but really getting involved in the nitty gritty details of the day-to-day, as far as things like circulation and how we provide service, that that really was something that impacted my job greatly. One of the interesting things that we managed to do with department heads is, we managed -- we had a standing weekly meeting. Now we have to talk to each other in passing, and it's hard to get everyone together to have a meeting, even though we're back. But it's funny that we

had all that time to meet and discuss, and work through policy. I almost miss that, to be honest with you.

KK: (laughs) Well, maybe that's sort of a silver lining, right, that you'll have that ability to do that, and maybe that's just a matter of scheduling at this point, right?

RH: Yeah. [00:13:00]

KK: So are there other -- you know, understanding the numbers of people who got sick up to this date, and the number of people who have passed away, how difficult that has been for the community of Allentown in particular, has been far too great. But in your opinion, are there other silver linings to the pandemic?

RH: Community-wise? Or just in general?

KK: Either, actually.

RH: Well, I think it's more based on my personal experience, but I hear stories from people with similar experiences. I think that as a society, we've managed to have our eyes open to what really is important, as far as relationships and connections with people. Being apart from families, you know, I've read so many stories online, and have spoken to people. You know, being apart from their families has been really difficult, you know, [00:14:00] and how much

everyone seems to appreciate that more. Even just email correspondence that I've had with colleagues or people within the community, community partners groups that we might have worked with, you know, everyone takes the time to say, "I hope you're well. I hope you stay safe." And I think -- I'd like to think it made us a slightly nicer, perhaps more generous community at large.

KK: Mm-hmm. So I just have a couple more quick questions. One is, is there anything that surprised you?

RH: Surprised me? Personally, or library-related?

KK: Either. I'm okay with either. (laughter)

RH: This is going to sound crazy, but how [00:15:00] much longer the seasons took the change. You know, as a child, it seems to take forever. I'm sure you can remember being home from school in the summertime, and thinking summer would last forever. And as an adult, we kind of take that for granted. And being home during lockdown, I went outside every day I absolutely could. And some afternoons, my teenage daughter and I just sat outside and connected, just enjoyed the spring. I found for the first time in a long time that I was able to observe all of the nuances that come with the season change. And there was a lot to

surprise, I guess, in that situation, because like I said, it took so much longer than I usually take note of.

[00:16:00] You know, usually I look out and there are no leaves on the trees, and one day I think, oh, there they are! (laughs) And suddenly I got to see it again. So that was kind of nice.

KK: Really, miss the in-between part, from the bud to the leaf, right.

RH: Yeah, yeah. I thought this really does take longer than I thought.

KK: That's a really good point. Oh my goodness. So two last questions; one, based on your experience in this pandemic, what would you advice future generations if they were faced with a similar situation?

RH: What would I advise future generations? I -- be prepared, I think. And when I mean "be prepared," I mean be prepared for every possibility, every possible good or bad situation. You know, I was a girl scout growing up, my daughter was a girl scout for a while. [00:17:00] You know, my family teases me because I'm that person that carries that extra blanket in the car in the winter, even though I don't go anywhere. (laughter) But I think we've

learned to be prepared, you know? When we all felt the crunch with the great toilet paper crisis, or, you know, people hoarding cleaning supplies or whatnot. I think that we can all -- I'm not saying we should all be preppers, you know. But perhaps be prepared for any kind of scenario in our lives. And that also means, you know, our relationships, in our connection with people, in our work environments. You know, I'm not always the best example of that at the library. But I think that we [00:18:00] shouldn't take it for granted. And we should maintain those things and be prepared for being a part, and having some sort of contingency plan if that would ever happen again, because I think if it comes around again, or it happens in a future generation, you know, I don't know about you, but I felt blindsided by the fact that suddenly I was cut off from the world. And I think that there's a real possibility it could happen again. And if we're ready for that possibility, I think it'll make it a little less painful, or maybe adjustment a little less painful.

KK: Yeah, that makes sense.

RH: Yeah?

KK: Yeah. And I agree with that. I think there's only so much you can do to prepare, like you said. But at the same time, I think if you have that -- you're aware of what you're doing on a daily basis, just, I think, that general awareness will help you be more prepared than anything else. Just being [00:19:00] aware, particularly when it comes to relationships and so forth. So yeah, I think you're right about that. And the last question is really open-ended. Is there anything else that you would want people to know about the library, the pandemic, the future?

RH: Well, there's always lots that I'd like people to know about the library. I think the biggest thing is -- and you can attest to this, we're not just about books, you know. For as great as books are, and I love books, and I like the smell of books, and I like to be lost in a book -- we're so much more. And I think the pandemic really helped bring that to light, at least for some of our users, because, you know, we have all of these great online resources. We have databases, we have streaming services, we have ebooks, the audiobooks. We have reference services that are available [00:20:00] remotely. We have things that people need right now. Since we're open again, we can offer remote printing

possibilities again. You know, we have computers for public use. We opened up our Wi-Fi during the pandemic, as you know, and we spread the signal out further into the community so people could come out and sit outside and use our free Wi-Fi. So we have all of these great services. I think that new people took advantage of that. Maybe people who just came in to check out that best seller might have suddenly become aware. We are more than just what people envision, you know, cardigan-wearing, glasses on a chain, you know, books-on-a-shelf librarians, you know, even though I do tend to wear cardigans.

KK: Well, right there, there's my mandatory cardigan.

RH: Yeah. But you know, there's so [00:21:00] much more possibility here. And I think that we should, more so maybe than we're doing right now, is we really ought to take advantage of the fact that the pandemic opened up the possibility for people to see that in us. Yeah, that we're just more, I guess, that it boils down to that.

KK: There you go. Well, thank you.

RH: Yeah, thanks.

KK: So that's it, that's everything I have.

RH: Great.

KK: So I really appreciate your time, and being a part of this Allentown in Quarantine project. I think it will bode well for people in the future to take a look back and see -- maybe get some sense of what day-to-day was like around here.

RH: Yeah. Absolutely. Thanks so much. This is such an exciting project.

KK: Thank you.

RH: I'm so glad we're part of it.

KK: Yeah.

RH: All right.

KK: Thank you.

RH: Thanks.

KK: Bye.

RH: Bye.

END OF AUDIO FILE