

# Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

## In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Susan Banks, MLIS

*Deputy Secretary & State Librarian*

*Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Pennsylvania Department of Education –  
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Interview by Stephanie Campbell

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### Tell us a little about your background. What led you to librarianship?

Well, I can say it was not a straight path to librarianship. I grew up on a farm in Kentucky as the youngest of 10 siblings and was an early and voracious reader – and organizer – of the household's books (of which we had many), so my siblings would say they're not surprised about where I've ended up. My undergraduate training and the first 17

years of my career was in theatre and the community arts. I also taught at the college level (speech and theatre), managed restaurants and waited tables, and worked as a grant writer and consultant for arts organizations. Although I used libraries frequently for my work as a production dramaturg and director for several theatre companies, I didn't consider working in one until I was in my thirties.

Once I got my first library job (Adult Services and Community Relations at the Hurt Battelle Memorial Library in West Jefferson, OH), I quickly realized that was exactly the place for me and that the only thing that stood between me and the leadership position I wanted was an MLIS. I applied to Kent State University, was accepted, and began my studies within a few months. By the time I was done with my degree (working full time while attending classes), I'd progressed through two other positions at the Plain City Public Library and was hired as the Director of the Marysville Public Library just before I graduated. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to begin my library career in Ohio public libraries. It's a privileged background, I know that.

## Your career has spanned libraries in many states and in various positions. Describe your career evolution, how those roles led to one another.

Looking back on the arc of my library career, it seems kind of magical, really. I was first hired into a position of dual responsibility that matched the experience and skills developed in my previous work – research, teaching, program development, and public service. It just felt so right (and effortless), to be able to do that work with such unquestioned support (and funding) – very different from a life in the arts. I moved to my second library which was even more well-funded and effective at connecting with the community – and I built programs and services that raised the bar with our community and our partners. The same is true of my first directorship. Plus, I learned so much about managing staff, working for a board, and building community partnerships. I'm very proud of the work I did in Central Ohio.

## You joined Commonwealth Libraries in 2018 and are now State Librarian since April. Tell us about this work.

I was hired as the Director of the Bureau of Library Development, to oversee all of the funding and grant programs OCL operates with state and federal funds as well as the advising and outreach work that the Bureau has been doing since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the State Library's Extension Services. Now that I'm almost four years in – more than a year in my current position of Deputy Secretary and State Librarian (officially and unofficially), I feel like I'm finally getting a handle on working within the systems of the Commonwealth (not a small task) and understanding how to inhabit a statewide leadership role in the provision and support of excellent and equitable library services to all the people of Pennsylvania.

I'm very excited about [our new 5-Year Plan](#) and a new plan for the Keystone program for library construction. I'm also excited about what lies ahead for the Office – with new folks joining us who are top-notch practitioners in all their roles. We're looking forward to the return to the Forum Building next year and to the historic and beautiful State Library of Pennsylvania, the Law Library, and the Rare Collections library. It will be such an amazing opportunity to reintroduce the public and our colleagues in the Department of Education who are returning to that building (which was built for the Department of Public Instruction) for the first time for many decades. It's going to be a new, exciting, inclusive, and accessible experience for everyone!

## What do you see as the biggest strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats to Pennsylvania libraries?

That's a good question. The answer is slightly different for every kind of library – but there are threads of similarity that cross between academic, public, school, and special libraries. Our strengths come from our insight and expertise as librarians – it's never been more important to hone, build, and expand those skills and promote them to our users and the public in general. Our weaknesses, I think, are the other side of those strengths – losing our expertise because 'everyone can Google it,' neglecting to build our practice, and having weak voices in the promotion and articulation of the value of libraries, librarians, and library services (wherever they are found).

Like those matched strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats are similarly linked. We exist in a world of challenges to intellectual freedom and rigor, and systemic underinvestment in the public good and education which is the foundation of libraries and library service. People have never been more in need of trusted and trustable guides and helpers in the storms of challenges which surround and blind all of us. We can take that responsibility seriously and be galvanized by the depth of the need for that role and of the value we represent, or we can throw our hands up because someone's not providing us with enough money or enough people to do the work or enough time or enough space. That's a terrible, passive position that I (for one) cannot embrace or even imagine embracing. If we forego the opportunity to lean into this challenge – to be the leaders and guides and reliable resources for ALL users – particularly those folks in the margins – we are lost. If we don't spend the energy now to seek out those people who need us but don't even know (at all levels), then we should just get ready to shutter the public libraries, give up our standards for rigorous research and service and make our peace with producing students from early childhood through post-secondary and beyond who will be led by any clever communicator who can convince them to believe in their schemes. That's the road to perdition on which we travel – and libraries stand at the crossroads, my friends.

## Describe, from your perspective, a typical day-in-the-life of a state librarian.

Well, there are a lot of meetings. I serve on the senior staff team for the Department of Education, which means a lot of meetings at which I represent the needs and interests of Pennsylvania's libraries as part of the educational ecosystem. There's a strong centrifugal force created by the swirling vortex of K-12, I'll say. So sometimes it's a struggle to push libraries toward the center, but I keep at it. I do a fair amount of writing, too (which I enjoy), and hope to do more of that in an intentional way as we move forward through the work of the new 5-year plan. We've been focusing a lot on streamlining processes and improving practices within the Office and both Bureaus, so we do a lot of work sessions on those items as well. We've been hiring folks to replace retiring librarians and advisors. That's an extremely time-consuming process for all of us, learning to work within the Commonwealth's operations.

Externally, I also stay active in our national association for the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) – which is interesting and useful as we compare and contrast with every other state and territory. I work a bit with the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) staff and with our statewide partners like the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and other agencies within the Commonwealth. I also represent the Department of Education as the Secretary's proxy on the Pennsylvania Historical and Museums Commission – they're our long-term sister agency who runs the State Museum and the State Archives. That's been fun and interesting to see their interior workings. So, an average day is just stuffed full of a variety of things (most requiring meetings) – which is great for someone who's as easily bored as I am.

## What are your goals as State Librarian?

I can honestly say that you can see a very concrete and practical roadmap of my hopes as State Librarian in [OCL's new 5-Year Plan](#). When I'm done with this job (whenever that happens), I want to have made things better for libraries in Pennsylvania and for the people of Pennsylvania. Everyone belongs in libraries – and libraries belong to everyone. I want to see every Pennsylvanian know and love and appreciate and participate in the life of their community with the help of excellent and equitable libraries.

I would like to know that I did everything I could to bring the library field in Pennsylvania as close as I could to the experience I was lucky enough to come up in in Ohio. Library staff and boards spend so much time and energy worrying (if not panicking) about where money is going to come from. If they would spend that time and energy instead on understanding and responding to the things their communities need with which the library is positioned to help, I believe in my heart that the worries about money will fade, if not disappear. People who hold the money fund things they feel are important and that produce good outcomes. I hope to help libraries across the state get better at being important to their users and producing good outcomes for the communities they serve.

## Finally, can you tell us why you do what you do?

I have always followed my heart, when it came to my jobs, my work, and my career choices. My heart has never let me down, although it has led me quite the chase across the country and back! When I found libraries as a job, I recognized a field that resonated with all my most deeply-held beliefs – in equity, access, and inclusion as central tenets – something on which my experience in theatre and the arts never quite delivered. Libraries responded so well to my focus on the user-experience, improving so quickly and comprehensively when we used that focus both on internal practices and public services.

I love working with people who are mission-driven by the same core beliefs as mine – probably aided by my being raised Catholic and attending 16 years of Catholic school. I was never going to join a religious order (something my father encouraged me to consider), but I could absolutely get behind being a librarian! My parents died long before I became a librarian – and one of the things that keeps me moving in this field of practice is the feeling that they'd be very proud of me (finally). Funny how that impetus sticks around, long after the people who instilled that drive in you are gone. As I enter into the final stage of my career, I know I've left every library I've worked at in better shape than when I started. That should be enough for any of us, I figure.