



# FROM CLASSROOM TO Courtroom

## OUR ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

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Kathy is reading *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* by Charles J. Shields.

**I**t's not unusual for outreach librarians to find themselves in remarkable places. In November 2007, on National Adoption Day, I found myself on the steps of the Johnson County Courthouse in the company of parents, politicians, judges, caseworkers, and families, all with eyes lifted, watching as white balloons were released and sailed upwards into the bright blue sky. We looked skyward with hope for the nine children and one adult participating in adoption ceremonies this day. It was a day of celebration and ritual, and you might wonder: What does any of this have to do with libraries? To answer that question I look back nearly twenty years, to about the time that the adult adoptee was born and shortly after the beginning of my work as an outreach librarian for the Johnson County (Kans.) Library (JCL).

### Outreach Fundamental—Developing Partnerships

Like all communities in the 1980s, our library saw a shift from stay-at-home moms to families using child care centers and preschool classrooms to care for their children. The youth library staff realized that developing partnerships and collaborations with care providers would be vital to the future of public library service to children and could be the foundation for youth outreach services. As a result, an advisory committee made up of representatives from Head Start, Parents as Teachers, the Parks and Recreation District, the YMCA, resource and referral agencies, child care directors, and classroom teachers was formed. Based on their recommendation, JCL began outreach visits to the places providing early care and education.

The idea that libraries can play a critical role in the lives of children began with a simple request for a visit by a home-based child care provider in Gardner, a small Kansas community. The problem was that she only had five children in her care. How could I justify the time and resources for such a small group? With hesitation I added her site onto a scheduled visit to a larger center in her area.

Entering her home, I was greeted by four children; the fifth was sick at home. I sat down on the floor with the children and began my program. As I read from and showed *Bear on a Bike* by Stella Blackstone, one of the children, a small boy of no more than four years old, got very excited about the pictures. He could hardly contain himself and began naming every picture on the page. "That's the sun!" he exclaimed. "That bear is on a boat!" he continued. "Look, there's a dolphin!" This was great feedback and I was encouraged to have him so engaged.

As I left, Mrs. Smith (that really was her name) thanked me. She was genuinely moved that the library offered this service and I told her I was happy we were able to work it out. Then she said something that shaped the way I have come to look at library service. "You don't understand," she said. "That child is in foster care; he's been with me for two weeks, and those are the first words he has said." Stunned, I left feeling very

grateful and a little dazed as I began to understand and appreciate the impact literature can have on people of all ages. I became as excited as that little boy. If stories and books could influence a child in that way, what power could they also bring to others in difficult times?

### Strategic Plan Gives Direction

The opportunity to explore that question came in 2001 when JCL adopted a new strategic plan, appropriately called Connections, which included a focus on at-risk youth. Several years later, as the youth outreach librarian, I find myself in a position to be able to offer books, reading groups, and sentencing alternatives for children that find themselves in the legal system for a variety of reasons. Prior to that, the State of Kansas had adopted a juvenile justice reform that states "youth are more effectively rehabilitated and served in their own community."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the community was being called upon to become involved in prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation of youth offenders.

### History of a Partnership

In 1997, JCL's youth services coordinator read an article in the local paper about a judge who was sentencing teens to read and report on a work of classic literature. The idea intrigued her, but she had some concerns. At the time, the library was lucky enough to have an attorney on the library board who was a strong advocate for young people and represented teens in court. During his visit with a client at the juvenile detention center, he saw the residents watching TV, playing pool, and generally just hanging out—nothing very productive happening. The convergence of these incidents resulted in an invitation for JCL to "be at the table" and involved with an ad hoc group of community partners assembled by that judge to investigate ways that literature and reading could be encouraged among the incarcerated population. Two programs emerged from that group: Read to Succeed (for juveniles in detention) and Changing Lives through Literature (CLTL), an alternate sentencing program in which offenders are referred by a judge or probation officer to participate in book discussion groups.<sup>2</sup>

### Building on Partnerships

As a result of being involved in these programs, a third opportunity presented itself in 2004 when

Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius appointed Kathleen Sloan to the 10th District Court, Division 10. Judge Sloan would handle all Child in Need of Care (CINC) cases and our collaboration would provide me with the chance to come full circle with that boy in foster care.

I'd been told that Judge Sloan loved books and would likely be a strong advocate of the CLTL program. So before she even moved into her new office, I arranged an appointment to meet her and request her participation in that group. Being an avid reader herself, she was extremely open to the idea and agreed to become involved in the book discussion groups with teen offenders. And what a coincidence when we discovered that *The Giver*, which is on the CLTL reading list, is one of her favorite books! She started suggesting to teens appearing in her courtroom that they read the book, and she asked if the library could provide several copies. Because of donations we'd received for our other programs for at-risk youth, we had money to make these purchases. Her involvement in CLTL sparked an idea that would result in an innovative program for children coming into her courtroom.

### Books in the Courtroom

Judge Sloan recognized how vulnerable and alone the youngest children coming through her doors must feel. Shortly after she was appointed, she began collecting donations of stuffed animals to give to the children who visit her courtroom. Because of JCL's involvement in CLTL, we discussed our shared belief that books could provide an equally satisfying result. When Judge Sloan said she wanted to solicit book donations from attorneys and other judges, I was thrilled and knew the library should be involved.

We realized early on that we didn't want used books; we didn't want these children getting the message that they were receiving leftovers. I created a list of preferred books that donors could purchase and submitted a request to the Johnson County Library Foundation (JCLF) for a donation to establish a beginning collection of new books that would be gifts to children coming into her courtroom.

In May 2006, the foundation donated \$1,000 to the cause; in the meantime, the Eagle Scout son of another judge built a bookcase for the corner of her courtroom. Subsequently, the JCLF has become the mechanism through which donations can be made specifically for this project. The Junior League of Kansas City and assorted individual donors have provided funding for the project. A librarian selects

and purchases books with the library's vendor discount and organizes and inventories the books on a monthly basis.

To date, more than 1,500 books have found homes with children visiting the courtroom. And the program has expanded into the courtroom of District Magistrate Judge Farley. In Judge Sloan's words, "It's often a sad time, and it's scary to be in [court]. I think books can have some type of positive experience in their life and they need that. It's a good step in the right direction."<sup>3</sup>

### Children in Need of Care

Unlike the teens that take part in CLTL book discussion groups, most of the young people that Judge Sloan sees aren't criminal offenders; many times they're there through no fault of their own. In 2005, there were 594 Children in Need of Care (CINC) cases in Johnson County, the majority of which were for abuse, neglect, or runaway behavior. Many of them found themselves placed in foster care. Judge Sloan expressed concern about several female runaways and wondered if it would be possible to start a reading group for them similar to CLTL. JCL administration was supportive of the idea. It was summer and a good time to occupy the girls with a productive activity. I was invited to attend a meeting of guardians *ad litem* (attorney-advocates assigned to represent children in court) and caseworkers to discuss possible opportunities. The main obstacle, along with their varying ages, would be that the children were spread out in foster homes all over the county, but we agreed that it was worth a try. Remembering that young foster boy from so long ago, I was more than ready for the challenge.

### Focus on Foster Care

When children in Johnson County are taken into custody by Kansas Social and Rehabilitation Services because of abuse or neglect, they are primarily referred to KVC (originally Kaw Valley Center) Behavioral Healthcare which then provides case management and related services. To begin planning a program in response to Judge Sloan's concern, I met with a caseworker from KVC and a guardian *ad litem*. Over the summer we implemented a book club for eight teen girls. My hope was that they would stay on and help with a follow-up group of younger children in the fall; three of the girls did. We chose a centrally located library to be our meeting place.

These children and the extraordinary families that care for them have many demands made on them,

so I wanted to make this worthwhile and give them something special to look forward to. In my mind, an idea was brewing that would prove to make this a unique experience for all of us and would focus on the younger group of children.

It was the summer of 2006, and plans had been confirmed that author and Newbery Award winner Kate DiCamillo would be visiting our library in the fall. The idea that she would spend time with this special group of children before presenting her program to the public lodged itself in my brain. When I pitched the idea to the author, she enthusiastically agreed. In a more recent interview, DiCamillo admitted, "I had never done an event like that before. I was intrigued, I guess. And also a little nervous. I didn't know what to expect."<sup>4</sup>

Eight children between the ages of eight and twelve were referred by the caseworker to a new book group. The children and I would prepare for the author's visit by reading all of her novels plus one more. We met once a week for five weeks; the sixth meeting featured a brunch with the author.

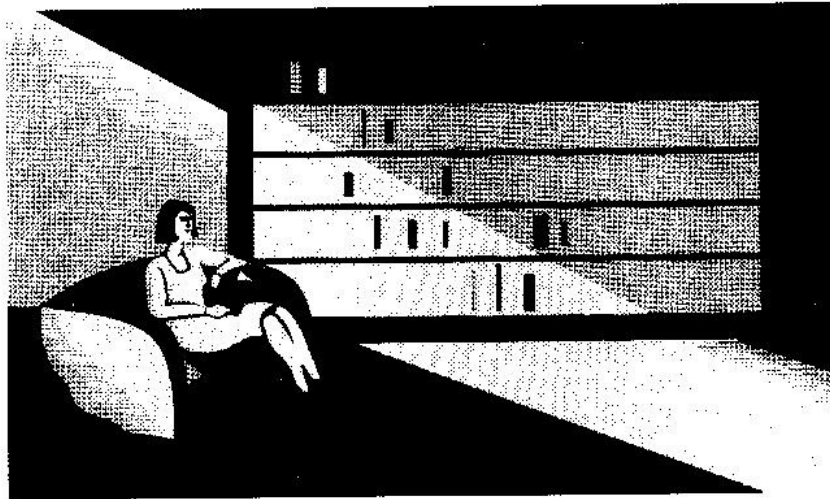
### The Reading List

Our reading list began with *Pictures of Hollis Woods* by Patricia Reilly Giff, a story to which each of these children could relate. As I introduced the book, the youngest boy looked around the table and happily recognized that this book was about someone in foster care like him. Some of the children read the book themselves; others were read to by their foster parents. It was exciting to think of the opportunity the reading provided for them to spend time together. When we met, we talked about the book, then made letter collages and bookmarks using the first letter of our names and by finding pictures in magazines that reflected things we like.

Our next book was DiCamillo's *Because of Winn Dixie*. One of the girls, who had been in ten different foster families exclaimed, "I've read this book seven times—I love it!" When I told her she would get to meet and eat with DiCamillo she was beside herself with excitement. I was once again impressed with how a good book can have such a personal connection. This girl could relate directly to the character of Opal and the theme of abandonment. When DiCamillo was asked whether she writes for a specific audience or theme in mind, she said, "I never really write with themes in mind. But after I'm done, I can see that certain themes are there, and that they repeat themselves from book to book. Abandonment is one of those themes for me. I keep coming back to

it unwittingly.”<sup>5</sup> After discussing this book, each of the children shared with the group ten things about themselves.

We followed with other works by DiCamillo: *Tiger Rising* and *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, concluding with *The Tale of Despereaux*. The latter book, too, was especially relevant to the children. They quickly understood that Despereaux was an unlikely hero, small but brave, whose parents were preoccupied with other matters, and that Miggery Sow was in need of love. Two of the girls also felt a special connection to music; one volunteered to sing and the other played her clarinet for us. Our activity for this book was to make a “map of your heart.” The older girls helping with the group responded to this with great insight. Our final project would be a group collage that would be displayed at the program with the author.



## Special Event

DiCamillo's program was scheduled for a Saturday and began with a catered brunch for the author, the children, and their families—foster or biological. Judge Sloan, several library staff, and a caseworker joined the group. The projects the children had created were on display and each child got to describe what he or she had done. Every one of them spoke to the group with ease and excitement. To our great delight, the singer and clarinet player also performed for the assembled group of about twenty-five guests. Children had the opportunity to talk with DiCamillo and have their books signed before she appeared at the library's “Meet the Author” event for the general public.

When asked to comment about the experience, DiCamillo had this to say: “They made a huge impression on me. They were brave and open and tender. I feel lucky to have spent time with them. I guess what I took away from the whole thing was how we all need to be seen apart from labels (“foster kid,” “foster parent” “writer”), how much we need to interact as people. That happened there for me, with those people. I felt connected to them.” She advises librarians that might consider this kind of event “that it's worth all the time and trouble because it shows to be true what we know to be true: books, stories can change lives.”<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, this type of event requires a great amount of staff time and commitment and would be difficult to replicate on a regular basis. But the basics are already in place for libraries that have reached out to develop partnerships with the agencies and organizations in their communities. Providing books to special populations lies well within the scope of most libraries' mission statements. Like any relationship, partnerships need to be nurtured on an ongoing basis. Staff turnover and new workloads require ongoing communication with the partners, along with creativity and flexibility in seeing how divergent paths intersect.

In retrospect, I see that it was an interaction with a four-year-old boy that triggered the awareness that literature paves a road that can connect humans at all levels—and that librarians have a role in establishing the partnerships that create the infrastructure. That road leads to child care centers, homes, courtrooms, classrooms, detention centers, drug treatment centers, and wherever else libraries and their partners can imagine it could go. ■

## References and Notes

1. Kansas Juvenile Justice Authority, [www.kansas.gov/jja](http://www.kansas.gov/jja) (accessed Jan. 6, 2009).
2. For a description in greater detail of these programs, see *VOYA* 30, no. 5 (Dec. 2007).
3. Gerald Hay, *Good Morning, Johnson County*, May 8–15, 2006, first edition. This is an internal newsletter that is only archived for six months.
4. Kate DiCamillo, e-mail interview with the author, Nov. 16, 2008.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*