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Beyond Books: Closing my Chapter at the Timmins Public Library

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Beyond Books: Closing my Chapter at the Timmins Public Library



When I first applied to work at the Timmins Public Library three years ago, I envisioned a relaxed summer surrounded by books. I had been a casual visitor to the library for many years, going to story times as a kid and, more recently, picking out summer reads. But over the last three summers, I realized that the library is so much more than that. In addition to novels, the library provides computer and internet access, information about community resources, materials about mental health and addiction, an air-conditioned space, friendly social interactions, and other vital resources. As a staff member, I regularly assisted people who had recently immigrated, been released from prison, or were homeless. While I encountered things in the library that I never anticipated—like used needles and violence between patrons—I realized that the challenges faced were also opportunities to make a difference and to develop skills for managing sensitive situations. It was not always a peaceful summer job. But I got the opportunity to do meaningful work in the community, a push to develop as a professional and a person, and a greater appreciation for the vital role of libraries in their communities.

My SASAH internship took place over the past summer—the summer of 2020—in the midst of the COVID pandemic. The library underwent unprecedented changes that summer: it was closed to the public, which forced us to limit our regular services and challenged us to provide vital resources to the community in new ways. So, though I had spent two previous summers at the library, this one was undoubtedly going to present new learning opportunities. Specifically, I hoped that by working collaboratively with a dynamic team to provide resources in innovative ways and to maintain communications and connection with the public, I would further the development of the communication, team-work, problem-solving, and time-management skills that I had been gaining throughout my education in SASAH. I also wanted to become more engaged in the community and to learn how to keep building community connections in challenging times. I hoped that by making this a SASAH internship, I would have the tools to reflect more deeply on the skills that I was developing and the kind of meaningful work that I was doing at the library.

As I rejoined the library last summer, my co-workers were also just returning to on-site work after several weeks working from home. The working environment was different than previous summers as staff were anxious and it felt for all of us like starting a new job. We were now offering curbside pick-up for the first time after several weeks of closure. Correspondingly, my primary duties were a little different. I was assisting patrons mainly over the phone to answer questions about library and city services, walk them through how to use our online resources, and take curbside pick-up requests. I would also retrieve requested materials for patrons, schedule pick-up times, and make curbside deliveries. I quarantined returned items and, later, re-shelved them. There was definitely an adjustment period for me as well as the other staff as we were all learning new procedures and making some mistakes. From mix-ups with curbside orders

to materials that were not properly checked-out, each of us had difficulties as we adjusted to the system. I had to adapt quickly but also be patient with myself. Library staff helped each other and refrained from passing blame when an error occurred. The importance of good chemistry and support between staff became evident as we had to work together to determine appropriate actions in unprecedented circumstances. I focused on keeping a calm, optimistic demeanor to contribute to a positive environment that made teamwork easy as we learned and improved together. We ultimately got great feedback on our services this summer, highlighting the success of our collaborative team.

The library team is tight-knit and mutually supportive. My internship supervisor was Erin, the Assistant Library Director. I was in close contact with Erin as she would support me through any issues I faced, assign me projects, and provide me with feedback on my work. I also had check-ins with the CEO Carole-Ann. But throughout the day, I was mostly in contact with my co-workers, including library clerks, reference staff, and the Children's Program directors. There are also many roles at the library that I did not realize existed before working there. Behind the front-desk workers, there are people cataloguing new books, maintaining our website, and organizing the inter-library loan of materials. Evidently, there are far more work opportunities and skillsets at the library than most people perceive. While there are usually also four summer students, I was the only one this summer, so I was integrated into the rest of the staff more than ever and also took on more responsibility. The library has an all-female staff, including its leadership team, which is inspiring to see. The staff work closely together, and my positive relationships with co-workers were a large part of what made the library such an enjoyable place to work.

Through my work last summer, I was also, of course, in contact with patrons. Our communication with patrons was essential as we relied on phone calls to connect them to appropriate resources. Since our online resources were in much greater demand, I often walked people through how to use our website over the phone. This was challenging especially when providing instructions in my second language, French, which was common since Timmins has a large francophone population. Though I attended French-immersion schools growing up, my language skills become rusty throughout the year as I am rarely called on to speak or write in French. There is always a notable improvement in my French throughout the summer as I am forced to practice a lot. Another communication challenge came when dealing with patrons expressing frustration over the reduction of services due to the pandemic. While I began my internship with strong communication skills from my SASAH education, I built on my skills through customer-service training courses which taught me how to address difficult behaviours. I implemented strategies from the training, such as modeling positive body language and explaining the reasons for our rules, to deescalate conflicts with aggravated patrons. I also learned to ask open-ended questions to go above and beyond patrons' requests by determining their broader goals. Acquiring these skills improved my interpersonal interactions and customer service.

Strong interpersonal skills are especially important when assisting more vulnerable populations at the library. This summer, I witnessed the social effects of the COVID crisis as I saw an increase in drug paraphernalia and people drinking on the library property. Whenever possible, our CEO Carole-Ann addressed such problematic behaviours. She models an inspiring ability to deescalate these situations with cordiality and compassion by speaking in a respectful tone to the patrons. While it would be much easier to call the police for every infraction, her

approach is more empathetic, keeps the situation from escalating, and establishes the library as a welcoming place for people who may be in need of resources. Likewise, the library has long been a safe space for locals experiencing homelessness, and we strive to provide positive interactions and communicate important resources. One of the hardest parts of the library closing was the displacement of homeless individuals at a time when they were particularly afflicted by the pandemic and in need of resources, safe spaces, and social interaction. Nevertheless, myself and other library staff continued to connect and check-in with many of our regulars who frequently sat around the perimeter of the library building. On one occasion, Carole-Ann was even able to direct a patron to a hot meal nearby upon his request, prompting us to update our list of local soup kitchens and post them around the building. By taking extra steps, such as speaking with patrons outside to alleviate potential isolation and sharing information in new ways, we worked to continue serving community members experiencing homelessness.

To further develop my ability to positively interact with homeless individuals, I had the privilege of completing several hours of Ryan Dowd's training on serving patrons experiencing homelessness. In his course, Dowd outlines the important role of libraries as resources for homeless individuals given that libraries are one of the only places where there are no rules against loitering. He also prescribes methods of managing potentially challenging behaviours. Dowd promotes empathy by explaining the roots of certain behaviours in some patrons experiencing homelessness and recommends specific actions, such as exchanging names and ensuring a fair enforcement of rules, that can improve interactions and avoid potential conflicts. Dowd's training, the positive example of our CEO's initiative, and my own experiences at the library have given me important tools to foster healthy interactions with people experiencing

homelessness. I hope to use these skills to continue the important work of helping vulnerable people in my communities.

In addition to fulfilling my regular duties at the library, I completed several independent projects to adapt our services to meet patron needs in the pandemic. For instance, I relabeled our large DVD and audio-book collections to indicate that they can now be returned in our drop-box. This allowed for contact-free returns, which were not accepted before the pandemic. I also updated the library's Safety Data Sheets to ensure that we had safety information for all of our new cleaning products. Since it was my third summer at the library, I was also assigned more substantial responsibilities and projects, such as creating social-media content. We had noticed that our juvenile books were not circulating as much since families rely on library visits to view and select books. Assigned to promote our juvenile collection, I created five iMovie videos highlighting a diverse selection of our new children's books for each age group. My posts resulted in a noticeable increase in check-outs of these materials. I was also assigned to promote the children's reading club, which was seeing a decline in participation this summer, by making a video announcing our two children's kayaks as the prizes for this year's club. This was an exciting chance to utilize my creativity since I was given complete liberty to make the video. With the help of a co-worker, I shot a stop-motion video of stuffed animals "paddling" the kayaks through the library. I scripted and recorded voiceovers in English and French, edited the videos together on iMovie, and wrote a Facebook post explicating our program. As I created a substantial amount of promotional content over the summer, I became a resource for co-workers seeking help to produce content on iMovie and established formats and branded intro slides that have been adopted to create a consistent brand across the library's videos.

My biggest task this summer was my leading role on our bilingual summer StoryWalks, a part of our summer reading club that expanded this year since it is outdoors and allows for social distancing. Because our patrons could not come in the library this summer, our StoryWalks were the perfect way to bring our programming to them and safely interact with the community. For these, we set up storyboards around popular paths around town so that people could read as they walked. There were a lot of steps to realizing this project, and I was given a lot of responsibility for it. First of all, I created a schedule for me and the two Children's Program Coordinators with deadlines for all the steps that each of us needed to complete. I managed our team by keeping track of our progress and making sure that everything was ready on time. Overseeing this small team of co-workers was the most challenging part of the project for me. I was anxious about monitoring the work of my more experienced co-workers. I had to overcome my reservations and learn to communicate graciously yet assertively to ensure that everyone was on track and on the same page. I have always struggled to command leading roles in groups, so this marked significant progress for me.

Aside from managing the big picture, I was responsible for many tasks, including creating promotional posters for the events. I designed bilingual promotional posters for the StoryWalk series and individual event posters for each walk which were shared on social media and through the Timmins press. I was happy with the end result as I created a consistent aesthetic with the posters, once again establishing a clear branding for the club. In addition, I managed to make a feedback survey on Google forms and used online resources to link it to a QR code for contactless access. I was proud of my ability to independently troubleshoot and adapt to the pandemic restrictions. I also completed the time-consuming task of creating the storyboards themselves by surgically tearing apart brand-new books and piecing them back together on

boards. The responsibility and creative control that I was given over the StoryWalks this summer increased my confidence in my ability to shape and realize substantial events. It was encouraging to see my work in the community and to contribute towards the library's goals of child literacy and community engagement.



I got to see the StoryWalks through as I carried out the events with a co-worker. We set up booths at the beginning of the walks and placed the storyboards along walking paths. Throughout the events, we spoke to passersby and members of our summer reading club to encourage further participation and promote future events and curbside ordering. We engaged with over a hundred people at each of our StoryWalks and received overwhelmingly positive feedback about the event. The StoryWalk gave us the ability to connect more closely with many of our patrons than we had all summer. We also partnered with local businesses for two of our walks as they hosted our storyboards to promote their business in these difficult economic times. The StoryWalks were a focal point of our pandemic programming as they helped bridge the gap between the library and the community. They were an excellent example of innovation as an

ideal solution to the pandemic restrictions. It was also a great opportunity for me to engage with people in the community and have a positive impact.

The library ended up reopening for limited in-person services the week after I completed my internship. As we approached reopening, my co-workers were once again feeling highly anxious. I observed how they pulled together to support one another by voicing their feelings and practicing new procedures together. The management team had also been under tremendous pressure throughout the summer because they had to develop new procedures and make difficult decisions about the timeline of our re-opening. Nevertheless, they made efforts to reassure staff members and to thoroughly address their concerns and accept their input in the days leading up to re-opening. It was incredibly valuable for me to be part of an organization in the midst of multiple transitions. I have seen the value of developing a supportive team environment, of which the library staff is a great example, and of adopting unfamiliar and innovative roles to adapt to contemporary circumstances. SASAH is doing an excellent job of helping students to excel in these areas in order to thrive in an evolving work environment.

SASAH prepared me to excel at my various roles at the library as I felt confident in my ability to troubleshoot and independently tackle projects that I had never done before. In SASAH, I have dabbled in the digital humanities, crafted a gallery exhibit, and drafted court documents, among other things. These learning experiences have given me a robust range of tools to complete a variety of work as well as the confidence to take on new challenges and unfamiliar tasks. I love that I have the adaptability to creatively manage a dynamic workload and appreciate that I got to do such a variety of work at the library. My job had the same element of diversity that drew me to SASAH where I always get to tackle exciting projects and explore new topics. The internship reinforced that variety will be essential for any career I pursue in the future.

since I enjoy challenging myself and using different skills throughout the day. This type of work requires effective time management and multi-tasking, skills I honed throughout the summer as I balanced meeting deadlines for projects with completing my regular duties at the front desk. I take pride in my ability to quietly complete my tasks without reminders or supervision and in my growing self-discipline and independent planning skills.

The opportunity to be part of a dynamic team overcoming drastic challenges also furthered the development of the problem-solving and team-work skills that I have been developing throughout my education in SASAH and advanced my professionalization. As I contributed to an innovative effort to adapt library services and help the library remain a powerful resource in the community, I experienced the trial and error that comes from facing such challenges. Problem-solving skills came from handling mistakes and issues that inevitably arose while adapting to our new duties. Through this process, I worked closely with the library team everyday as our duties are collaborative. My managing role in projects like the StoryWalks further pushed me to take the lead in group collaborations. Though I struggled at first, the ability to lead came from an increased confidence that I was a valuable member of the team and had the management skills to make sure we were all successful. After this project, I find myself more naturally assuming a leading role in group projects and settings. My experience at the library also furthered my professionalization more generally, giving me experience working within an organization and representing a brand in the public. This made me more confident in my ability to attain and fulfill professional roles in the future, even those that may at first appear intimidating or beyond my expertise.

It was likely my increased ease of communication, sparked by training sessions and my practical experiences, that was the most notable professional growth for me this summer. I

developed interpersonal skills not only for working with a team of like-minded people but also for interacting with unpredictable and potentially difficult members of the public. I have always been much more confident in my written communication skills than my verbal or interpersonal skills. As an introvert, I was insecure about my ability to navigate challenging social interactions and saw this as an impediment to many professional opportunities. After the summer, I am feeling significantly more confident in my ability to communicate effectively under pressure. My realization of the positive impact that such interactions can have, by offering assistance and alliance to those in need, has motivated me to pursue future opportunities that require outreach or communication with the public. For example, I am confident that I can take on roles in journalism that require me to interview people or communications roles where I heavily interact with the public. My communications in French were particularly improved over the summer as I interacted with a largely bilingual community in Timmins. This has allowed me to maintain a working proficiency in French which is beneficial for attaining many jobs in Canada.

In addition to these “soft skills” that will help me face future challenges, I also gained a lot of marketable experience during my internship. I gained in-demand skills for social-media promotions as I designed and wrote a lot of promotional content for the library. And I also gained team-management and event-planning experience by leading a team in realizing the StoryWalks. These experiences can help me pursue related opportunities in the future. Overall, the internship was a fantastic complement to my education in SASAH. It gave me the opportunity to utilize and hone the skills I have developed over the past three years and to experience how this skillset empowers me to have a meaningful impact in my community.

My internship also gave me a better idea of the direction I wish to pursue going forward. While I remain fairly open in terms of my career direction, working at a library did reveal more

information about my professional goals. For instance, though I typically envision myself as a more independent worker, I found myself enjoying being part of a team at the library. The relationships I developed with co-workers made work enjoyable, and my experience highlighted that a positive work environment can be tremendously important in terms of satisfaction and success in an organization. While I plan to pursue jobs involving writing, which can lead to a largely solitary career, after working at the library I know that it is ideal for me to be able to collaborate and interact with others in my work rather than being isolated in a cubicle. Moreover, the meaningful work that I undertook at the library affirmed my drive to pursue work that is impactful. Having a positive impact on others was a major driving force for me, and I am encouraged to know that I have the capacity to make a difference. I would love to work for an organization whose values align with my own, to write about causes important to me, or to otherwise work in a capacity that allows me to make a meaningful impact in the world. My experience at the library also revealed to me that there is a space and demand for writing in a variety of domains. I have always loved writing and wish to continue this practice in my career. I was surprised by how much I was able to use my writing skills to create social-media posts at the library. I also realized that I really enjoy the more artistic creativity that came from designing posters and producing videos. This broadened my perspective of suitable careers for myself, and in the future, I would love to pursue work that allows me to apply my writing skills and creativity in diverse ways.

Utilizing my time at the library as a SASAH internship allowed me to draw greater meaning from my work by reflecting on the substantial impact it had on my development and the community. Since I wrote frequent reflections on my work, I was constantly thinking critically about the skills I was gaining, and I now have a written record of my experiences. Writing a

summative report of my internship at the end of the summer was a great way to pull all of my experiences together and see the bigger picture. Subsequently, creating my internship presentation was helpful in reflecting on my skills and experiences as I was afforded a degree of hindsight. In order to prepare my presentation, I reviewed my summative report. While I wrote the report right at the tail end of my experiences, when it was fresh in my mind, I was now picking it up again after setting it aside for several months. While I had to refresh my mind about a lot of experiences, it was easier in many ways to see the bigger picture and have a more critical perspective on my experiences now that some time had passed. It was also a great time to be reflecting on my internship once again because I was beginning to apply for jobs and my experience at the library is one of the main features of my resume.

Creating my internship presentation was especially helpful as I had to very succinctly summarize the skills and value that I derived from my internship. It was essentially an expanded version of how I would pitch my experience to a potential employer, so it was a great opportunity for practice. Through the presentation itself, I even got more communication skills as I faced my fear of public speaking. The questions period after my internship was especially formative as I was surprised at what parts of my presentation drew attention and curiosity from listeners. Most of the questions asked me to expand upon the varied and important services that libraries provide to vulnerable populations. These questions reminded me that, three years ago, before I had worked at the library, I perceived working as a librarian to be a fairly one-dimensional job in which they merely check-out and re-shelve books. However, so much of the value that I took from my internship comes from the other services and challenges encountered at the library. When I am communicating my experience to people who have not worked at public libraries, I understand that it is important for me to emphasize the complexities and

breadth of the work that is done there. Luckily, my internship presentation helped me to succinctly enunciate this context in order to ensure that potential employers understand the valuable skills and experiences I gained from this internship.

I can especially appreciate the value of reflecting on the skills and experiences I gained at the library as I am in the process of job hunting and will be marketing my experience at the library to potential employers. While the positions I am currently applying for are mostly related to journalism and content writing, thus differing somewhat from my role at the library, I am now easily able to enunciate how the values derived from this internship are applicable more broadly to new opportunities. My resume reflects the values I was able to enunciate through the creation of my internship presentation. Namely, it highlights the social-media and event-planning experience I gained at the library, as well as the communication, time-management, and problem-solving skills I developed. When tailoring my resume to different positions, I can emphasize different skills or facets of my experience, making it a versatile and valuable section of my history. Though my work at the library is a bit of an outlier from the other experiences on my resume, which primarily include copyediting and writing experience, it rounds out my skills and fills important gaps in my portfolio. Thus, I am confident that it can help me access new opportunities in a variety of career spaces moving forward.

Watching other people's internship presentations was also helpful as they provided blueprints for how to market skills and experiences. I was impressed by the quality of presentations that my peers gave. Though many of us had such different experiences, it was clear that we all gained a lot of value and personal development from them. These internship presentation events are at the core of what is unique about SASAH and what it offers students. Everyone in the program has different majors, skills, and experiences. When we all come

together and learn from one another, it creates a collaborative community that is so enriching. From SASAH's Introduction to Professional and Community Practices course, I know that networks are important for building our futures, and I am confident that the students in this cohort can support one another and find value in our different skills and assets.

Ultimately, my work at the Timmins Public Library was an amazing experience, and I was able to derive so much more value from it by making it a SASAH internship and especially through the creation of my presentation. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn and grow over the last four years in SASAH as well as through my experiences at the library over the summers. I am moving forward with a greater confidence in my professional strengths and assets. I am certain that these experiences will enable me to access more enriching opportunities in the near future.