

Welcome to Library Land

By **Reccia Mandelcorn**

Anyone who has read or listened to media these past months has come to know that there is trouble in Library Land. The Toronto Public Library, the largest public library system in North America, allowed Meghan Murphy, a highly controversial, radical feminist whose ideology does not acknowledge trans women as 'real women', to speak at their Palmerston branch despite public outcry from citizens, politicians and prominent authors.

Controversy about use of public space in libraries is not new. Vancouver Public Library faced similar dissent in January when they allowed Murphy her platform. Critics decried this decision on the grounds that Murphy promotes fear, discrimination and hatred towards an already marginalized population - a population that is protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Last year, I attended a panel discussion on this very topic with prominent speakers Micheal Vonn (BC) and James Turk (Toronto); both speaking from the perspective of the Centre for Free Expression on the legal definition of what constitutes hate speech. They put forth strong arguments that I, as a lifetime proponent of the importance of free expression support, especially in relation to the role of the public library.

Canadian libraries are built on the foundation of the fundamental right to free speech. Embedded in our policies and value statements is the responsibility to guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable.

And there is also the legal definition of what constitutes hate speech. Canadian Law has a very high bar; Mr. Justice Rothstein wrote that courts 'have generally identified only extreme and egregious examples of delegitimizing expression as hate speech. This approach excludes merely offensive or hurtful expression from the ambit of the provision?'

As a parent, I encouraged freedom for my child. Reach out and express yourself; your only limits are when your freedom attacks, oppresses or hurts another human being. And this is why I angst over the issue of freedom of expression within the current controversy.

Trans people, in particular trans youth, are a particularly vulnerable demographic. According to the Human Rights Campaign, they are disproportionately subject to assault and murder as a result of their trans status. Often bullied from childhood, two-thirds of trans youth engage in self-harm. In Library Land, we pride ourselves on being a safe place

and space for all members of our society, most especially those who are marginalized. So, although I believe in the right to freedom of expression, I am concerned about the message sent to trans individuals by public institutions in the guise of this right we hold close as Canadians.

Historically, the legal system is slow to catch up with beliefs that were once considered acceptable, such as systems of apartheid, segregation and anti-Semitism. Populist and right-wing leanings threaten to gain legitimacy through becoming mainstream. What is our responsibility as public institutions to support balanced, respectful and open dialogue ? and where do we draw the line between free speech and hate speech?

There is trouble in Library Land.

Reccia Mandelcorn is the Manager, Community Collaboration at Aurora Public Library. The opinions expressed in this column reflect her personal thoughts about the engagement of community with their public library.