

Is it good to show people we're more than just dusty books on a shelf?



By Brock Weir

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you read the word "librarian"?

The image might vary from person to person, but chances are, whatever you saw was accompanied by a quick, but firm, "Shh!" That is something that Jill Foster has worked to shed over her time as CEO of the Aurora Public Library and, as she prepares to take leave of her role next week to head into a well-deserved retirement after more than five years on the job, it is a legacy she is confident she leaves behind.

Ms. Foster came to Aurora in the fall of 2014 from New Brunswick at the height of a long career in Library Services. With her grown children living in the GTA, Ms. Foster knew Aurora was the place she'd want to wind down her working life while "feeling like I was making a real difference."

From her perspective, that is very much mission accomplished.

"I think I am leaving the Library stronger than it was," Ms. Foster tells *The Auroran*. "It was strong to begin with, so I had lots of good, raw material, but I feel it is stronger than it was as we have taken a path of community-led engagement that is going to reap real benefits for the community in the coming years."

Along with that, Ms. Foster says she feels library staffing is in a very good place, a mix of long-time experienced staff and new ideas coming in to make sure there's a perfect blend of tradition, stability and innovation.

Tradition, stability, and innovation have been three key pillars of her time as CEO of the Aurora Public Library (APL).

Patrons, she says, have not wanted to see the APL change drastically, but change is essential in attracting people who might not have used the library in quite a while, or have come to question the relevancy of public libraries with so much information now available at one's finger tips.

It's a "juggling act," she says, but she and her team were ready to take the stage.

"It is really about community development," says Ms. Foster of what she saw as her personal mandate. "Because the Library is such a well-used municipal service, I think when you're at the helm of an organization like that you have to be very mindful of staying in touch with the community, trying to do your best to provide what the community wants. There's the classic example in an older, traditional library that you buy books you think people should read because you're steeped in literature, they are the classics and good quality reading. The other side of it is you have to provide what people want or nobody is going to come to the Library and use your materials. I think it is the same way with programming and services you provide. You have to have the traditional basic services that everyone wants, but you have to provide some new, different and exciting things."

An example of this, she says, is a Letter to the Editor that appeared in last week's edition of *The Auroran*, criticizing APL for hosting a Drag Queen Story Time to mark the start of Pride Month, along with a defence from the participating Drag Queen storyteller. This is but one instance, she says, where some people might have concerns with "new, different and exciting things," but, at the same time, might spark others into seeing APL as, "this is a place for me and I never thought it was before."

"We have to ruffle feathers to satisfy others. You can never please everybody all the time but that, for me, was the big challenge when I came here and will be the challenge long after I go," she says. "It is what makes the job so interesting " after 30+ years, you

never know from one day to the next what you'll be faced with, what someone is going to ask you about, what someone is going to be concerned about. It is a very interesting job.?

Over the years, the Aurora Public Library has also fielded concerns from more traditional Library users about APL's shift away from just the traditional library model, to a traditional library model that is married with the concept of being a community hub ? a hub of creativity and innovation.

This shift has been marked with the increased emphasis on digital media, maker-spaces, including 3D printers and associated programs, and offering the Library's central ?living room? space as a venue for live poetry and live music in support of a number of community organizations.

?When we do things like have a band playing in the living room ? it is noisy and disturbs people, that is not the intent, but I try to attend a lot of those things that go on because it just makes me feel good about the library,? says Ms. Foster. ?It is good to shake things up and show people that we are more than dusty books on a shelf or a children's story time, which is key to what we do, but we do so much more. I think doing those things that position the library as a community hub for fun, for culture, for laughter, for song, I think that is probably being able to do those kinds of things have been my happiest times here. I know some people are still not on board with that kind of thing. I hope it continues, I hope my successor will feel those things are important too, and I would hope the Board would see that in someone they were choosing to carry on.

?I am very hopeful because that is what will keep the Library moving and will keep people coming in because people will often say, ?I don't know why we need libraries anymore. We have the internet. We can find everything.' We're not a community hub on the internet. You might have social media, but it is not the same as coming together, coming into a building, and sharing experiences. I think that is the best thing about having worked at Aurora Public Library; being able to do those interesting, unexpected things that please a lot of people and maybe make people think of the library as a community space or in a way that people haven't before.?

NEXT WEEK: Ms. Foster discusses issues facing the Aurora Public Library down the road and advice to her successor Bruce A. Gorman.