11-2011

Guest Editors' Column: The Solo Librarian

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**Recommended Citation**

Church, Audrey and Reeve, Frances, "Guest Editors' Column: The Solo Librarian" (2011). *Education & Human Services Faculty Publications*. Paper 4.

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The Solo Librarian

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When Ann Martin, chair of the editorial board for Knowledge Quest, called to inquire if we would be interested in serving as guest co-editors of an upcoming issue of Knowledge Quest, we were intrigued. When she told us that the theme of the issue would be the "solo librarian," we were hooked. Between the two of us, we have thirty-nine years experience as building-level school librarians and thirty-four years educating future school librarians. Yet, both of us began our careers as solo librarians, lone rangers in our schools.

Audrey's first position in the early 1980s was as a primary school librarian in a rural school serving grades K–2, total enrollment just around 300. Frances worked as an elementary school librarian in the early 1970s in a rural school with a total enrollment of 280 in grades 1–7.

Times have changed, however. Fast forward to 2011. We read news of the library field, follow blogs, participate in listservs, attend conferences, and talk with other professionals, and we know that to say that this is a challenging time for school libraries and school librarians is an understatement. A look at Shonda Brisco's Google map, "A Nation without School Librarians," on AASL's Advocacy page is enough to make us lose sleep at night. It shows "cities, towns, communities, and states that have made the decision to either eliminate certified school librarian positions (indicated in blue) or require one school librarian to work with two or more school library programs throughout the week (indicated in red)," and there is entirely too much blue and red on the map!

Solo librarianship was a topic that we wanted to address.

First, our task was to define "solo librarian." Next we wanted to give you the opportunity to hear the stories of colleagues who are working as solo librarians in the twenty-first century. And, finally, our goal was to provide resources, assistance, and rays of hope.

Faces of Solo Librarianship

What is a solo librarian? For the purpose of this issue of Knowledge Quest, we define a solo librarian as a school librarian working alone—no paid clerk, aide, paraprofessional, or second librarian. A solo
school librarian could serve a small school with low enrollment that has always been staffed by a single professional. Or a solo librarian could be a professional who, due to budget cuts and financial challenges, is now working alone in a setting where the school librarian once had staff and, perhaps, a second professional colleague. Or a solo school librarian could be one now called upon to serve multiple schools across a school district, perhaps in the position of being the only professionally trained school librarian in the school district. Solo librarianship has many faces.

Voices of Solo Librarianship

We wanted to hear from solo school librarians from various geographical locations in the country and from various levels and types of schools. We asked them to share their experiences, their strategies, and lessons learned. To that end, elementary school librarian Robbie Nickel (NV) shares how school librarians in Elko County School District (which crosses two time zones!) have collaborated to problem solve, to meet student needs, and to extend resources.

Nancy Terrell (VA) tells about hard choices that impact student services in her middle school library but suggests, nonetheless, that we should embrace change with a positive attitude. Anne Busch (MO) also relates loss of staffing in her high school library, emphasizing the importance of delegating, streamlining, and keeping cool whenever possible.

Wayne Cherry (TX) brings us the school librarian’s perspective from an independent school, likening solo librarianship to juggling and noting the important role that trained volunteers play in his library program.

Cynthia Karabush and Pam Pleviak (IL) argue forcefully that we should be proactive to leverage our talents and usefulness to both students and staff by taking part in committee work and grabbing leadership opportunities and by identifying high-impact tasks. Laura Slusser (VA) shares her powerful story of advocacy opportunities missed and offers advice that she, too, will embrace in her next school library position.

Common threads in these stories are the importance of prioritizing, of letting go of things that we may have always done "that way," of delegating and sharing responsibility, and of focusing—first and foremost—on services to students.

Are [solo librarian] jobs challenging? Absolutely. They have to learn to prioritize, to work smart, to strategically use their time and resources, and to take time for themselves, both personally and professionally. Are they up for the task? If the stories told here are indicative, we have no doubt!
Resources for School Librarians

Finally, we wanted to offer resources and strategies to assist those school librarians flying solo. Those of you who have a clerk in your library or work with another trained school librarian, don’t put down this issue of *Knowledge Quest*; these are resources and strategies and ideas that you certainly can use as well! They are not reserved for our solo colleagues!

Mary Woodard (TX) provides a district supervisor’s perspective, sharing how Mesquite Independent School District has supported its solo school librarians since the 1970s, realizing that the school librarian’s role is to collaborate, to teach, and to work with students and teachers, not to perform clerical tasks.

Helen Adams (WI) explores intellectual freedom in the context of solo librarianship and gives suggestions for setting priorities, finding allies, and taking steps to protect students’ First Amendment rights.

Cynthia Anderson (KS) presents solid ideas and workable strategies for getting grant funding for our libraries, starting small, and making a difference.

Sandra Andrews (NC) summarizes the various national data sets that are available to assist us as we make decisions to improve our programs.

Becky Pasco (NE) explores aspects of solo librarianship from the perspective of an educator of school librarians, reminding school librarians that, though they may be solo librarians, they are an integral part of the educational fabric of their schools.

Carl Harvey, in his president’s column, emphasizes that none of us must go it alone and points out some of the many ways that AASL supports us—from publications to position statements to standards and guidelines to essential links to professional development opportunities to networking.

This issue of *Knowledge Quest* is rich with stories and ideas. Yes, solo librarians are lone rangers; they juggle; they fly solo. Are they alone? Absolutely not! They are supported by a network of colleagues both in their school districts and beyond, by the educators who taught them to be school librarians, by their state and national professional associations, and by the 21st-century technologies that connect them and prevent them from being isolated.

Are their jobs challenging? Absolutely! They have to learn to prioritize, to work smart, to strategically use their time and resources, and to take time for themselves, both personally and professionally. Are they up for the task? If the stories told here are indicative, we have no doubt!

Audrey Church is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is the author of *Leverage Your Library Program to Help Raise Test Scores* (Linworth 2003), "The Instructional Role of Library Media Specialists as Perceived by Elementary School Principals" (SLMR 2008), and "Secondary School Principals’ Perceptions of the School Librarian’s Instructional Role" (SLMR 2010). She currently serves as the Educators of School Librarians Section representative to the AASL Board of Directors.

Frances Reeve is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is coauthor of "Prove it! Using Data to Advocate for School Library Media Programs" in Educational Media and Technology Yearbook, 2009. She most recently served AASL as a member of the Standards and Guidelines Implementation Task Force and is president-elect of her state organization, the Virginia Educational Media Association.

**Works Cited:**
