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**Column: A New Generation in Librarianship**

## **Imposter Syndrome: Living the Idea of “Fake It ‘til You Make It”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This column will showcase different aspects of the journey from musical theatre professional to director of a rural public library: how this came to be, findings of a library outsider, and recommendations for overcoming imposter syndrome. The author mentions the successes and failures she experienced in her first year as a library supervisor, and the sharp contrast between growing up in an urban setting and working in a rural city/county public library. This column concludes with the idea that how one presents oneself and the tangible actions one takes towards working in and advocating for their library can speak more highly of their abilities than being a perfect job candidate on paper.

### **KEYWORDS**

imposter syndrome, library administration, early career, COVID-19

### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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An actual conversation I have had with a former high school classmate 10 years later:

Classmate: So, what are you doing nowadays? Something with music?

Me: Actually, I'm a Library Director in Devils Lake (North Dakota).

Classmate: ...

Me: ...?

Classmate: You? In a library?

Me: Yep.

Classmate: The thing I remember most about you is how loud your voice is...

Me: Also, yep.

### **From the Stage to the Stacks**

There is nothing quite like a bachelor's degree in theatre to prepare you to take on a role you never expected. For me, the unexpected role was as Library Director at the Lake Region Public Library in Devils Lake, North Dakota (population: 7,500).

I always knew music and theatre were going to impact my future in a substantial way. In high school in Fargo, North Dakota, I was the student who had five full class periods every day dedicated to music and theatre. In college, I began as a vocal music education major, intending to use my type-A leadership skills (i.e., assertiveness) to achieve what my mother called "an actual, viable career" as opposed to going to theatre school. I was unable to stop myself, however, and ended up switching majors to graduate summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre and Minor in Music. After bouncing around survival jobs while working as a freelance music director and accompanist in the upper Midwest, I decided it was time to return to school so I could work towards teaching music and theatre at the collegiate level. I took a year in 2018 to complete my degree in music, then headed to Oklahoma City University to pursue a Master of Music in Vocal Coaching. Enter stage left: COVID-19.

### **The Shared Experience**

The beauty of live theatre is in shared experiences. Every single performance consists of an audience, performers, crew members, orchestra members, artistic staff, and facility staff who have never gathered in precisely that same way before, and never will again. This universal experience is unique and fleeting. Pair this with the fact that live theatre strives to embrace themes and experiences that resonate with the audience, and you have what I think of as The Shared Experience (with a capital The). In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic operates in a similar way; we as humans have a Shared Experience thanks to this phenomenon. It is my belief

that you would be hard-pressed to find someone who had not been lonely, isolated, anxious, grief-stricken, angry, or scared in 2020.

Yet through this global change, there has been room for growth and opportunity. For me, this looked different than I ever would have imagined. I left Oklahoma City in my bright orange Prius and returned to the upper Midwest—specifically to Grand Forks, North Dakota. I worked as the Program Manager at the historic Empire Arts Center, where I oversaw all internal programming, events, and facility operations. I thought this was my dream job; I got to work in a theater all day and then music direct or perform in productions at night. Unfortunately, this quickly turned into the fastest burnout I have ever experienced. My high-functioning anxiety escalated to the point where it was difficult to force myself to eat, knowing the uphill climb that awaited me in the office, and the long days spent away from my partner and dogs in the rehearsal room. When my partner was offered a State’s Attorney position for Ramsey County in Devils Lake, about 90 miles due west of Grand Forks, I decided to move with him. Believe it or not, arts administration and nonprofit jobs in a rural community of 7,500 are few and far between. I took a job as a dental assistant in an incredible practice that was willing to work with someone with less than no experience; and then, I existed. For the year 2021, I existed. The phrase “new normal” was tossed around a lot in 2021, and here we are, now in 2024, and I would say that the “new normal” has been altered, expanded, and changed a dozen times since then.

### **Tricking My Way into My Dream Job**

In November of 2021, just after my partner and I were married after eight lovely years together, a County Commissioner offhandedly told my husband that the library in town was searching for a new director, and that I should apply. This person had never met me face-to-face, but apparently the red-headed, music-minded gal with the louder-than-acceptable voice had made an impression on city and county employees. I was touched and read the job description: “Minimum qualifications: Master of Library Science degree or equivalent, two years’ experience preferred.” Assuming no one in their right mind would look twice at my résumé, I sent off my materials and waited for the detached, polite email thanking me for my application, but who was I to apply for such a position without a single concrete qualification? To my surprise, I was offered an interview that lasted over 90 minutes with two women with whom I genuinely enjoyed conversing. I do not remember the last time this had happened in my adult life. A few weeks later, I got the call: the Lake Region Public Library had created a position for me. I was to be the Director of Outreach and Innovation, focusing on community partnerships, programming, and technology, while the Director of Operations would be in charge of all things books. It was an ideal scenario; I would be able to draw on my events experience and educational/theatrical background to get the library’s presence out in the community, and I would not have to worry about any of the other stuff until years from now, when the Co-Director retired. Wrong.

Those first eight months working in a library as a brand-new-to-libraries manager had high highs and low lows. Highs included events and opportunities that got the library out into the community. Participation in the local Arts Fest, attending area Back-to-School nights, and establishing a regular partnership with local media have all yielded great relationships, more visitors to the library, and higher attendance in programs. I did have to reconcile my past experience and expectations of libraries from my upbringing in a community of 150,000 to one that was less than 8,000. Ideas have been aplenty, but between staffing and the number of physical resources available in this smaller community, I have certainly had to temper my expectations. This is not always a bad thing; I'm a huge proponent of being a lifelong learner, and this was just one more thing that I could and do continue to learn. As an outsider to the microcosm of library and information sciences, my observation (which is in no way unique) is that public libraries have shifted from quiet, subdued, dusty temples of knowledge to thriving community hubs where anyone and everyone is welcome. No more are the stereotypical bespectacled librarian crones of old shushing your every move; instead, we are encouraging participation and conversation in programs and events. It really is inspiring to walk into a space that features not only the escape of books, but also practical and fun offerings for all ages. Little did I know that confidence in public speaking, the desire to spark change, and the willingness to put in the work would make this job and my library as a whole the best possible place for me.

### **Too Young, Too Soon**

Unfortunately, several of the lows I experienced in 2022 stemmed from imposter syndrome and my proclivity towards over-enthusiasm. Ironically, my relatively young age has proven to be one of the largest hurdles I have had to overcome in my professional life. I am white, middle-class, and identify as a cisgendered female, which comes with its own challenges, but to be young compared to the mental image an aging town has of what librarians should look like? Forget it. The youngest person to hold this position before me was in their mid-thirties, and here I am in my late twenties, thinking I can direct a library. I was new to this community, where the lifers knew every person who had ever been born within a twenty-mile radius and were distrusting of outsiders. Yet the thing I heard and continue to hear most as I am out and about, doing my grocery shopping or representing the library at community events, is, "You're doing such great work at the library." Why is this? If you were to ask my prevalent imposter syndrome, it would answer something like, "The novelty of something new is giving you beginner's luck," or "Your voice is physically so loud, it's no wonder you make an impression on people." I work actively each day to combat this voice in my head, which is so loud it often rivals my own.

Fast forward to today: I am the full Library Director, with less than a full year's experience. If I thought that imposter syndrome was difficult last year, it is nothing compared to the crippling self-doubt I experience on a seemingly weekly basis. The newest trial by fire? My

library building turned 20 years old this past December and here is a tip: the life expectancy of everything important is apparently a simultaneous 20 years. HVAC, lighting, flooring, bathroom fixtures, and paint all need to be updated at the same time. Talking with contractors about building needs, when I can barely understand the well system of our geothermal water-sourced heat pumps, absolutely amplifies the voice in my head that tells me I do not know what I am doing.

The most difficult aspect of imposter syndrome (for me, anyway) is the fact that if you present yourself to the world in a way that you wish you saw in the mirror, no one will know or understand the internal struggle that is constantly happening. No one will see the debilitating fear that a program will not be attended or know the anticipation before speaking on behalf of the library at a public forum. They just assume you internalize the confidence you project. Thankfully, my theatre training has provided me with some concrete ways to combat this.

### **Superhero Stance and Conclusion**

One of the best tips I learned from a theatre professor was the “superhero” stance and mantra. This is most effective when you are feeling particularly nervous or anxious, to the point where your heart rate is elevated, and your self-doubt is through the roof. It’s pretty easy (though I prefer to do this behind closed doors so I can keep up the illusion that I have everything under control all the time): all you do is stand in a strong stance with your feet shoulder-width apart, place your hands in fists on your hips, raise your rib cage, stand with the best posture you can muster, and breathe in through your nose. As you are ready to exhale, smile and say aloud, “I got this.” Repeat at least five times, breathing as deeply as you can through your nose each time. As you breathe in, if you can feel the pressure of your inhaled breath at the front of your hips, it is even better. By the end, you will have calmed your sympathetic nervous system enough that your heart rate will decrease, your breathing will be regular, and you will have the physical confidence to smile and tackle the task ahead. Boom! Imposter syndrome cured.

Well, perhaps not really. But sometimes physically tricking my body into thinking I am capable of something can go a long way. I would tell new, young Library Directors—especially those transitioning from a larger community to a smaller one—that actions and presentation can potentially make far more of a difference than the qualifications found on your résumé. It is astounding how many resources are available for learning the hard skills of working in libraries; these can be learned and acquired through a number of lessons and experiences. Concrete, tangible skills such as cataloging, completing inventory, applying for State Aid can all be taught to competent individuals. But the measurable actions you take to improve your library, whether by upping the number of programs, increasing the library presence in your community, or just being a more welcoming presence to patrons, will speak more to your ability than other things. I state this as a fact because this is what I have experienced; I have already incorrectly cataloged

books, been unable to point a patron to an unlisted business that only the locals knew about, and struggled to load microfilm yet I am thanked and praised for my welcoming smile and helpful attitude, and for my willingness to try things that have never been tried here before. I think those actions are pinnacles of librarianship that mean my loud voice and I are here to stay.