Q&A with Tommy Bui: Cultivating partnerships in the field and beyond

Tommy Bui is a 2015-2016 Scholar who holds an MLIS from the University of North Texas and an M.A. in English from California State University – Northridge. He currently works as an Associate Librarian at the Inglewood Public Library in Inglewood, California. In this position, he serves a diverse community by incorporating art-related programming like their recent printmaking workshop, and partnering with local art centers. He recently traveled to Cuba and ran the Havana Marathon.

You previously mentioned that you have been able to "incorporate art-related programming that is inclusive and engaging to stakeholders of a wide demographic." Could you elaborate on what type of programming you've done? What would you suggest to others hoping to emulate similarly inclusive and engaging programming?

A recent example of the library's art-related programming that is engaging and inclusive was a printmaking event in partnership with a local art collective Self-Help Graphics. Self-Help Graphics is a historic and storied art collective based in East Los Angeles that prides themselves in having a social justice component and youth empowerment is at the forefront of their advocacy. The event was robustly attended at our library by young and old alike. Families and teens and every other demographic was ticked and in attendance. It was a rousing success, all said. My advice to others for staging inclusive programming is be receptive to feedback and to hone a sensitivity to the needs of the community. Only then can libraries effectively and sustainably serve their stakeholders.

In your experience, what are some traits to have or things to keep in mind when looking to cultivate community partnerships?

I would suggest seeking out partnerships with like-minded entities that share your values and long-term objectives. I also would recommend not ruling out unorthodox or nontraditional partnerships. For example, we recently collaborated with a local yoga studio that focuses on serving low-income households and provides bilingual classes for a predominantly Spanish-speaking community. This organization's modus operandi aligns auspiciously with our own principles of inclusivity and increasing access to services. Fruitful partnerships aren't always in plain sight but they're certainly there if you squint and look hard enough.

What are some skills you learned in your MLIS program or prior positions that you apply in your current role as an associate librarian in a public library?

I worked in a library setting while I finished my MLIS and the insight I acquired that best armed me to weather the slings and arrows of daily public librarianship is to fortify oneself with a hearty dose of humor. As Chekhov so sagely said, if it's worth crying over, it's also worth laughing over. Being a good sport has served me well whilst working with the public. Probably the most handy trait to wield in the ol' library-ly arsenal.

How has your experience as a Spectrum Scholar influenced your life thus far (personally, professionally, etc.)?

Being a Spectrum Scholar has enriched my professional life immensely. It's connected me with other library professionals and peers that I admire greatly and given me a sense of kinship and fraternity while toiling away in the trenches of library work. It's a merry motley of dedicated information professionals and I'm grateful for the opportunity to be included in the fold.

As we approach ALA Annual and the new cohort of Scholars prepares to travel to New Orleans for the Spectrum Leadership Institute, what advice do you have for them to make the most out of their experience?

Get out of your comfort zone. Meet new people. Gain new skills. And then don't hesitate to fail miserably at new endeavours. Smooth waters doth not make a skilled mariner. So embrace the argy-bargy foofaraw that is the Spectrum Leadership Institute. And you'll walk away with freights and freights of new insights and experiences. Guaranteed.

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