

Q&A with Jhani Miller: Activism and the importance of "passing the torch"



Jhani Miller is a 2014-2015 Scholar who received their MS/LIS from the University of Illinois School of Information Sciences and their BA in Interdisciplinary Studies at Governors State University. They are currently the Library Information Supervisor at the Brooklyn Public Library - Ulmer Park Branch where they continue to explore intersectionality, information literacy and community advocacy in New York City. In 2017, Jhani wrote the blog post below on their reaction to becoming part of the Spectrum community. We followed up with

them to elaborate more on their activism, professional journey, and the importance of mentorship. (Photo credit: Arie Ross)

Backstreet Boys once sang, "Lemme tell you the story 'bout the call that changed my destiny." I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. By this point in my life I was knee deep in library science. I'd interned at the University of Wisconsin Madison Information Specialist Internship Program (ISIP). I'd done work study at Governors State University's academic library.

But also, I was one snap away from losing my funding to finish school. Don't get me wrong. I loved volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club teaching pole dancing for free, and even doing collection development at the juvenile detention center. Nevertheless, universities typically did not accept goodwill as payment. I just didn't know how I would have been able to afford tuition.

The weather was beautiful that day. My ringtone was the theme song to *The Boondocks*. I seldom got to hear it so I knew this would be a special 312 surprise. I'd won a Spectrum Scholarship and as the perks were listed, I began crying and dancing. I heard the things that would be mine, and my mind filled with the memory of walks from cheerleading practice to the library to finish my homework and wait for my single mother to get off her second shift.

I remembered aspiring to be as cool as my tough-as-a-diamonds librarian who always let me know when a scholarship would be perfect for me. I remembered the books and music I borrowed that carried me away from my childhood poverty. I felt a new family would enter into my life. I was right.

Today, I am a public librarian in New York City. I still dance and cheerlead for others. I still do a lot of things for free even when I can't afford to. I still get excited when my phone rings, although now my ringtone is *Bruja* by Princess Nokia and people do call me more regularly (POP-U-LAR!). I love that I am in a position to pass the torch by mentoring others. I get a true kick out of gaining real life relationships with heroes in my head. Spectrum gave me such a gift. The Spectrum Scholarship awarded me a career and a library family.

What are some skills you learned in your MS/LIS program or prior positions that you apply in your current role as a library information supervisor?

The soft skills I learned during my MLIS program have served me well in my role as a Library and Information supervisor. Having a proven track record of leadership roles may help one up the stairs of success but it takes problem solving and conflict resolution to unlock the doors. Before (and even during grad school), I was a bit of a lone wolf. I did not enjoy being forced into group work. Now that I am in the professional real world, I really thrive on it. It would be virtually impossible to get projects off the ground or keep any public branch running around the clock without my amazing team of clerical staff, librarians, technologists, and supervisors by my side. Another biggie for me is communication. People tell me that I come across as fearless or like I just say it like it is yet I'm nice (I'm not nice). Do not get it twisted. I am terrified all the time. I seldom even know what I am doing. Again, this is where communication [comes into play]. See something confusing? Say that makes no sense to me. I don't get it. Please help me. You had a nasty breakup? Your SSRI prescription has not kicked in yet? As a manager, you don't necessarily have to spill all the tea, but certainly you can let me know you're experiencing some summertime sadness that might affect your mental health or workplace demeanor. On the happy end, if you have something positive happening in your life that might take your attention away, I want to know that too so I can further advocate for your personal accomplishments.

You mentioned that you love being able to "pass the torch by mentoring others." Why do you believe mentorship is important, specifically for librarians of color? In what ways have you benefitted from mentorship (either on the mentee or mentor side)?

My mentors/mentees are such a blessing. They are the ones that send me amazing, silly animal videos when I am down. They are the first ones I contact when something fabulous has gone wrong. They are the first ones I contact when something awful turned into a Long Island Iced Tea. There is this myth that "we" don't get along with each other; that being a librarian of color is like Highlander and there can only be one. Foolishness. The mentorship process in my experience has been mutually beneficial and empowering. I get to work closely with individuals that are excited to learn and who want to steer clear of complacency. Mentorship offers such a needed exchange of passion for diverse backgrounds, yet still, with a common care and enthusiasm for staying engaged in the same industry.

When did you become involved in pole dance research, and how did you begin doing advocacy work within the pole dance community?

I wrote my first academic paper about aerial/pole dance when I was finishing my undergraduate degree at Governors State University. My English composition instructor assigned the class the typical 20 page research paper on any topic so I decided to go there. I'd be dancing for a while and I was thrilled about the opportunity to interview my fellow movers and shakers about their day-to-day lives. By graduate school at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, I was much more confident about focusing my writing and movement career on aerial dance as a vital area of expertise even though I knew my primary occupational hope was to become a traditional librarian. These days, I can say that I've fairly seamlessly merged dance and library science into my life and moreover, now I've been able to better expand my concentration to add sex worker protection, victim support, social influence, reproductive justice, union rights, and gender & sexuality literary exploration especially for Black femme voices. Last year I did the a pole dance class at the

Brooklyn Public Library and you can find some of my recent writing and thoughts about current pole dance trends on International Pole Convention (www.poleconvention.com/author/jhani/), Poetry Project, and Bad Kitty to name a few and the list is growing.

In your previous post, you wrote, "Spectrum gave me such a gift. The Spectrum Scholarship awarded me a career and a library family." How has your experience as a Spectrum Scholar influenced your life thus far (personally, professionally, etc.)?

Spectrum Scholars were dope then and they stay lit now. I feel honored to have known my Spectrum family for quite a few years and I can see now how I underestimated the important role my cohort and the many other Scholars would factor into my life today. We all need a hero and that hero for me is Spectrum, in particular Gwen[dolyn]. I do feel just a little bit braver about presenting that controversial opinion because I have Spectrum. I feel just a little bit like I can make it another day in this field because I have my cohort rooting for me. I feel like I can make a few more forgivable mistakes and there are people who won't cancel me or let me fall too hard when I fail because that's the gift of Spectrum. We are a family of influencers.

Jhani will be reporting for Bad Kitty at the International Pole Federation later this spring, marching with the Brooklyn Public Library at the Brooklyn Pride Parade in June, launching their website in October, and presenting for Urban Librarians Unite (ULU) at the New York Library Association conference in November. You can follow Jhani on Instagram at @librarian_shimmy.

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