

## Attention Prendergast Library board of Directors

My name is Cheryl Johnson, former Chief Reference Librarian at James Prendergast Library. Amid all the swirl of rumors, half-truths and exaggerations, I feel I should relate my side of the story. The announcement of my retirement came earlier than I had expected. The catalyst was a directive from Linda Mielke to write an evaluation of George Fuller since he was still on probation at the Reference Desk. George was hired by Catherine Way, Tina Scott and myself following an interview in April 2011. Nothing was ever mentioned concerning any probationary period. When I told Linda this, she waved an old staff manual at me and said that's what this book says. That staff manual has not been in use in the last 25 years. I am the only department head that has a copy since I was given one 39 years ago. After much disagreement I finally wrote an evaluation and submitted it to Linda via email. I also have a printed copy in my files. The next day she emailed me her "corrections" and her instructions to change my original assessment to reflect her views. Since I believe an evaluation is an opinion, I would not sign my name to something I didn't believe was true. Knowing there would be repercussions, I decided to resign/retire. On February 23 I resigned giving Linda two weeks notice, George resigned instead of being fired, and Mary Ann Zimmer, a part-time reference librarian gave her notice. George was told he had an hour to vacate the building. I was told to pack up my things as this was my last day of work.

In the three months that I worked under the directorship of Linda Mielke our philosophies concerning the library were definitely at odds. The Reference Department has always been in charge of selecting the materials and electronic databases. Over the years we have carefully developed the various collections. This has resulted in a solid reference collection, an appealing popular assortment of materials and useful databases on various subjects. We have taken suggestions and donations from the public and added them when appropriate. Now we were told we didn't know what our patrons wanted. Linda is from the school of thought that advocates "give 'em what they want". That's fine, but we need to know what they want. Several of us devised a quick survey to put on our website and hand out inside the library. We were told a survey would be conducted by a company in Canada. In the meantime, at Linda's request a committee was formed to study usage patterns and decide how the materials budget would be allocated. We met various times and agonized over each item. Since Linda did not attend any of these meetings, I gave her our final recommendations along with our justifications for each expenditure. When the budget was finally returned, it was almost unrecognizable. All the databases that Prendergast purchases were cut except the Automobile Repair Database and even then she did not allocate enough money to continue that subscription until I brought that to her attention. New York State does provide some databases for libraries, however these do not provide popular ones such as Ancestry, Literature Criticism or RefUSA. Periodicals were slashed so there wasn't enough money to even cover our daily newspapers. These are in constant use. The lions' share of the money was to be spent on multiple copies of bestsellers and dvds. After several more meetings she did concede to spending less money on dvds and \$5,000 more to be used for magazines. It has been said that the periodicals are not used very much. Maybe people do not check them out of the library,

thus giving us a circulation figure, but they are read in the library on a daily basis. The periodicals we could no longer afford would be dropped immediately per Linda, regardless of the fact that they had already been paid for in 2011's budget. Since we buy them through a magazine jobber instead of individual publishers this would incur a penalty of \$15 on each discontinued magazine. Over 75 titles were cancelled. Any reimbursement will be pro-rated by each individual publisher and sent to the library within the next year. Meanwhile the jobber will be billing the library for the penalty amount.

The book collection will be greatly impacted by the new budget. The fiction, especially bestsellers will predominate. The new amount for fiction is more than was spent in 2011 on all books. Non-fiction books will have to be purchased out of the money given to us from New York State. These funds are given to Prendergast to function as the co-central library in the Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Library System. While this money is to be used for only non-fiction books and other research-type resources, it is to be spent to enhance the collections of the entire library system. Additionally each member library is to spend its own funds on non-fiction materials. Through contract Prendergast Library is also the college library for JBC. It was instrumental in helping them receive their accreditation from the Middle States Association Of Schools and Colleges. Previously no accredited college in their association had a public library as their academic library. Because of the depth of the Prendergast's reference collection, this accreditation was given. Thus JBC has certain expectations concerning the materials available at Prendergast. Not only will less academic-type books be purchased, but the present reference collection has been weeded at Linda's instruction and relocated to a smaller area of the library. This was done to make space for VHS tapes and audio materials displaced by the new downstairs computer room. As a reference librarian for almost 40 years this has been very stressful. It is untrue that many of these materials were very outdated. This section of the library was weeded prior to the renovation in 2009. It is also untrue that everyone can find what they want on the internet for free. Another area of concern was the maintenance of McKinney's Consolidated Laws of New York State. This set of books is used practically every day. I used it to find answers to some of Linda's first questions to me. Linda does not see it as a necessary expenditure, even though updates are our only cost. The Jamestown Bar Association contributes some money toward this upkeep. Linda thinks everyone can use the law library in the County Courthouse. This library is totally self-serve and only open Monday to Friday 9-5. Many of our patrons would find it difficult to access it during those hours or to find transportation there.

The Prendergast Library under the direction of Murray Bob and Catherine Way has never lagged behind other libraries. Many times it was the leader in libraries of its size. Awards are not won by libraries who do not keep pace with technology. Computers, databases, ebooks, and other technology were added in a timely fashion. Public computer classes have been taught for years. Prendergast has been in the 21st century since that century began.

Change is good when it is well thought out and planned. Change for the sake of change

causes chaos. The present staff has been through a lot of upheaval. They were loyal workers through the challenges of the renovation in 2009. They deserve the support of the board during this stressful time. Right now the library still is functioning pretty much as usual. However, in the next few months results of some hasty decisions will be seen. Databases will expire, magazines will stop coming and the new book collection will be skewed toward the popular. The balanced collection Prendergast has typically strived for will be in jeopardy. This will be especially true if this function is outsourced to a company who picks and purchases the selections on behalf of the library. Local control is lost. Will our traditional funding sources, the City of Jamestown, local foundations, and individual donors be happy with the new philosophy? Most people may be able to buy what they want, the latest James Patterson, a popular dvd, etc. But will the library have what they need when they have to cope with cancer, help a child improve their grades, or write a research paper? Will all patrons get what they want or will only a few be served? Is the Prendergast Library really being used less, or are people because of their busy schedules just using it more remotely than in person? Hopefully the \$6,000 survey spent, out of the materials budget, will provide the answers.

I do want to thank the board for allowing me the privilege of serving this community for 39+ years. It will always be a major part of my life. A memory to be savored.

Sincerely yours,

Cheryl L. Johnson