

A Valentine

Head for the Edge

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Sandy. She was my first. She was older...and experienced. I was young and innocent and a little frightened. I wanted nothing more than to be good at what I did. Sandy was patient, caring and oh-so wise. She taught me the "little things" I could do, but also helped me see what I did within the larger picture.

There have been others since Sandy. A Bonnie, a Donna, a couple of Janes. Each in their own way, very special. But it is Sandy who helped make me the man I am today.

Sandy, this Valentine's for you.

A quick quiz: From whom did you learn the most about running a library?

- A. A college professor
- B. A fellow professional librarian
- C. Your first library paraprofessional

For many of us the answer is c. It has been my good fortune to have had the experience of working with amazing clerks, secretaries, and media paras throughout my career. These unsung heroes of the library world are under-paid, are under-appreciated, and are among the most important people in the school.

Too often I have forgotten that the paraprofessional is really the "face of the library." These are the folks who our staff and students often encounter first when they come into our libraries. It is whom they deal with on a regular basis. And whether that face is smiling or frowning makes a huge impact on the library's climate.

In my experience, students rarely differentiate between the library professional and paraprofessional. My youngest library users often called me "Mr. Palardy" or Bonnie, my aide, "Mrs. Johnson" simply assuming Mrs. Palardy and I were married as well as being co-workers. I am sure it embarrassed Bonnie.

The most accurate description of how most paraprofessionals are treated is "benign neglect." Sure, we are friendly. We bring a flower on "Secretaries' Day." We smile at the pictures of their children or grandchildren when they make the rounds. But how much do we really address the "professional" part of "paraprofessional"?

For all the Sandys and Bonnies out there, let's resolve to:

1. **Get them out of the building.** Paras need and appreciate staff development opportunities just as much as we professionals. Learning about new trends in librarianship, about new student educational resources, about new customer service skills, and about using new technologies are needed staff development opportunities for paras. Everyone feels better about themselves if they feel more competent about what they do.

State library conferences often have a strand for paraprofessionals. Watch for state conferences especially for paraprofessionals. The Soaring to Excellence <www.cod.edu/teleconf/soaring/> teleconferences are excellent and valuable for support staff as well as professionals.

2. **Support their formal training goals.** The path taken by some of our best professional librarians started with the librarian as a parent volunteer, then as a library para, and finally as a professional librarian. If one of your

support staff shows an interest in getting a library degree, encourage them. We need all the quality people in our field we can get.

3. **Value their contribution to the team.** Build on the recognition that you and your para's skills are complimentary. I am NOT a detail person, and the best clerical and technical people with whom I work are. The simple acknowledgement that all skills used by the library's staff are important is essential.
4. **Include them in planning and policy-making.** One of my favorite stories tells of a janitor at NASA in the late '60s. When asked what his job was, he replied, "To help put a man on the moon." Support staff members should know not just their jobs, but how those jobs are critical to the mission of the library program and school. One way to build this understanding is by making sure they have a voice in visioning, planning, budgeting, and policy-making.
5. **Encourage their creativity.** If your para wants to read the kindergarteners a story, what's the problem? If he has dynamic idea for a display or reading promotion, why not encourage him? Clerical tasks can be stultifyingly dull. The chance for your para to do something creative, exciting, and different not only helps prevent job burnout, but can be of genuine value to your program
6. **Provide them with resources.** See that your support staff know about Mary Niederlander's wonderful website <librarysupportstaff.com>. It's packed with resources especially for them. Check out the bibliography from the Soaring to Excellence's teleconference about support staff at <www.cod.edu/teleconf/soaring/030321links.htm>.
7. **Run interference for them.** It's not the para's job to take heat from disgruntled teachers or parents. The best professionals protect and defend their support staff. You pick on my para and you'll answer to ME!

Finally, we need to harness all our interpersonal skills when working with all staff, including our support staff. Darlene Severance, Manager of the Liberty County (Florida) Public Library has a wonderful list of "do's" and "don't's" when working with paraprofessionals at <www.tfn.net/Liberty_Library/para.html>. It's worth reading a couple times.

So, dear Sandy, accept this small token of my appreciation. You taught me above all that behind every successful professional librarian is a competent paraprofessional. You'll be special to me always.