

Maine Voices: By reopening to the public, Portland library is returning to our mission

pressherald.com/2021/08/04/maine-voices-by-reopening-to-the-public-portland-library-is-returning-to-our-mission/

By Hannah Matthews

August 4, 2021



At work the other day, a woman approached me, apologizing. Her young son let go of her hand and went running past us, yelling that he was going to find a book. I could see, behind her mask and glasses, that she was crying.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she kept saying, as I searched my desk for a box of tissues I could offer her. “It’s just been such a hard year. We’re so happy to be back here again, with you.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hannah Matthews works in the Sam L. Cohen Children’s Library at the Portland Public Library.

When the Portland Public Library opened our doors to the public June 22, my colleagues and I hit the ground running. Those of us on the front lines of public interaction had been nervously preparing for scenarios that could put us or others around us in danger. Many of

us, staff and patrons alike, have young children who cannot yet be vaccinated, or elderly parents, or health conditions that make us especially vulnerable to the virus and its variants, and we all carry the weight of this awareness in our bodies.

The PPL staff has, like so many Mainers, faced a patchwork of stressors and struggles during this time: furloughs, reduced hours, shifting job responsibilities to fill in gaps, and the challenges of creating new ways to serve people remotely. Stress, fatigue, heartbreak and anger – financial, medical, logistical and existential – radiated through our city and, inevitably, our work.

And we were constantly, heartbreakingly, aware of our sudden lack of ability to serve all of our patrons. Folks with no computer access or no means of transportation were unable to reach out to us for help or information or human connection, as they normally would. Like nearly every other facet of life in America, we felt our work becoming inequitable as the pandemic dragged on. For people who chose our jobs specifically in order to help everybody, this was unspeakably painful.

In preparing to open to the public and get back to workdays that resembled our pre-pandemic job duties, helping patrons face to face, we have been nervous, yes, but also overjoyed and grateful to return to the pursuit of our mission.

Welcoming you all back into our building has meant seeing the children who have grown by a foot and a reading level over the year they've spent at home, the babies who were born since we last saw their parents, the patrons of all ages and circumstances who have discovered new authors and topics and interests in this time away from our stacks and help desks, and who are eager to tell us about all the changes that have happened in their lives during our long time apart.

Being a library worker is about so much more than information and books. Each hour of our workday is filled with the interactions and conversations, both large and small, that shape our patrons' paths forward and our own. Beyond shelving and recommendations, beyond help with taxes and citizenship, beyond research and reading – librarianship is about securing equal footing for everyone and ensuring that our communities have access to trusted information and mutual aid resources in times of confusion, chaos and stress.

Related

[Read Tuesday's Maine Voices: It's time to lower financial barriers to vaccination](#)

COVID-19 has only made clearer the reason that public libraries exist, and the reason that front-line library workers continue to serve at their desks: We all rely on one other. We are all connected, and thus we are all responsible for keeping each other healthy and safe and informed. That is why our doors have been closed, and it's also why they are open now.

Welcome to the library, Portland, from the folks who help you find and check out your books, the folks who wipe down the tables and computers before you use them and the folks who take your phone calls and direct you to the community resources you need.

We're so happy to be here again, with you.

[« Previous](#)

[Maine Voices: It's time to lower financial barriers to vaccination](#)

© 2021