

# 2022 PLA Conference Scholarship Reports



(L to R): Elisha Sheffer, Rhinelander District Library; Laurie Ollhoff, T.B. Scott Free Library (Merrill); Jennifer Davis, Minocqua Public Library; Dan Richter, Marathon County Public Library; Julie Kinney, Marathon County Public Library; and Ashley Polinski, Rhinelander District Library.

## WVLS Post-Conference Report

Dan Richter, MCPL

### 1. Please highlight three sessions from the conference.

**What were the session topics? Who presented them? What made these presentations effective and meaningful to you?**

All of the sessions I attended at the PLA conference had value and offered new insight that will be helpful to me in the future, but the three standout sessions that I attended were “Message Dissemination During a Crisis,” “Effective Security Strategies: Empowering Staff to Address Disruptive Behaviors” and “Prepare Your Library for Today’s Censorship Battles.”

Presented by Gregg Dodd, Director of Marketing for the Columbus Metropolitan Library (CML), “Message Dissemination During a Crisis” outlined how Dodd and his communications team handled a shooting at the library’s main branch in 2017. Attendees saw step-by-step, hour-by-hour how the library handled the shooting from a public relations standpoint, from closing the location, coordinating with law enforcement and the media, informing the public via press releases and timely updates on social media, and conducting news interviews. Attendees saw examples of the press releases and social media posts that the CML staff used, as well as video clips that showed how local TV news stations covered the event.

Dodd was a dynamic speaker, and the way he structured his presentation was really engaging. Along with offering general tips and advice for effective public relations strategies, Dodd also provided attendees with a digital copy of CML’s 200+ page PR strategy guide, which outlines step-by-step how the library handles a myriad of crises, from severe weather to employee-related scandals to pandemic-related closures. As a library marketing specialist, this presentation was invaluable to me, as it gave me guidance and a framework for developing PR strategies for the Marathon County Public Library (MCPL).

“Effective Security Strategies” was led by Yvette May, Branch Manager and Shirley Mason, Circulation Services Manager, both of the Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL). Yvette and Shirley detailed their library system’s approach to remedying problem behavior at their locations while also keeping staff members safe. This session especially resonated with me as MCPL has recently seen a general uptick in problematic patron behavior, as well as incidents that have included physical threats and violence.



Yvette and Shirley advocated for a strong, firm and consistent approach with patrons who violate your library’s behavior policy, stating that failing to do so will allow problematic behavior to become a habit that is difficult to remedy once it becomes the norm. They also offered some

ideas and tools that staff members employ to share timely, up-to-date information with one another regarding patron infractions, and offered tips for helping staff members avoid mental exhaustion and burnout.

Deborah Caldwell Stone, Megan Cusick, and Kristin Pekoll, all from the American Library Association (ALA); and Peter Coyl from the Sacramento Public Library presented “Prepare Your Library for Today’s Censorship Battles.” Book censorship in school and public libraries has gotten national attention recently as more and more book challenges have been brought to those institutions. The panel’s presentation touched on the reasoning behind some of the challenges, as well as information on the coordinated effort that some state, regional and national social groups (the majority of them being radically conservative) are making to get certain books, or books about certain subject matters, removed from library shelves. Some of these challenges have even resulted in lawsuits, or in librarians losing their jobs. The presentation provided strategies for combating book challenges, and provided resources that that ALA has available to support library staff, and their board, when facing book challenges that become controversial.

**2. Please highlight a conference experience, other than attending a conference session. Did you talk to someone you didn’t know at a session? Sit next to someone at a luncheon and have a meaningful conversation? Visit with an exhibitor? How did this experience affect your overall outlook of the conference?**

I had a few interactions with both exhibitors and fellow attendees during the conference. I visited with two staff members from Beanstack and discussed how MCPL has used the app to facilitate our Summer Library Program in 2020 and 2021, and as a way for parents and youth to participate in our 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten and 100 Books Before Graduation programs. We talked about how MCPL could move forward with the app in post-pandemic times, and about the dual nature of offering paper/in-person reading slips along with the paperless option of Beanstack.



Before the author lunch with Clothilde Ewing, I chatted with two librarians at our table – one from Oregon and one from Indiana. They were both directors of small libraries and were astonished by the fact that our library has a staff member dedicated to public relations and social media. I also talked to a librarian from Florida prior to one of the sessions starting, and we bonded over the fact that our libraries have both been facing an increase in physically violent patron incidents.



As a whole, these personal interactions really encapsulated the advantage of attending a large, national conference in-person – doing so gives you the chance to meet, interact with and share experiences with others that you can relate to on numerous levels. There was a charged energy in the air of the Oregon Convention Center as it bustled with attendees seemingly filled with purpose, ambition and eagerness. This energy was infectious and resulted in an entirely different feeling that those who attended virtually never got to experience. It was inspiring, and resulted in me having a renewed outlook upon my return.

**3. As a result of attending this conference, what three things do you plan on implementing at your library in the next six months?**

During “Effective Security Strategies,” Yvette May and Shirley Mason talked about how their libraries have a shared spreadsheet on their intranet that is used as a place for employees to keep track of banned patrons and negative patron interactions, including length of ban, details from the incidents, photos of banned patrons, and more. While MCPL *does* have a banned patrons list on our intranet that includes minimal information, we don’t have a detailed shared document like the one Yvette and Shirley spoke of. Instead, we generally use email as a way to communicate these incidents with one another. Within the next six months, I’d like MCPL to implement this shared spreadsheet strategy as a way to improve communication between teams and help all of the employees get on the same page when it comes to logging these incidents. The more information our employees have, the better equipped we will be to appropriately and effectively address these situations. I plan to use the spreadsheet template that the presenters showed during their presentation as a model.

I was also inspired by the “Message Dissemination During a Crisis” session with Gregg Dodd. At the end of the session, Gregg gave attendees an electronic copy of the Columbus Metropolitan Library’s (CML) 200+ page PR strategy guide. As previously mentioned, this comprehensive guide outlines in detail how CML’s marketing and communications team approaches handling different crisis events, including severe weather-related closures, shootings, power outages and more. The guide includes sample press releases, a list of media outlets to send them to, sample social media posts that can be quickly adapted to the situation at hand, and more. I plan to use this guide to create a crisis preparedness plan that I can utilize in the event of time-sensitive crises, or that other staff members can use in instances that I’m not available.

At “Creating a Dynamic and Diverse Author Series,” presenters William Kelly and Wendy Bartlett from the Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL) advocated for the use of the website Edelweiss for getting in touch with and booking authors to speak at your library. Edelweiss is not a resource that we have used before when finding authors to speak at the library, or for the Central Wisconsin Book Festival, so it’s a tool that we’ll take advantage of using in the future. William and Wendy also offered other advice, such as reaching out to authors who will be traveling to cities around you (i.e. Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, Minneapolis) on publisher-funded tours and propose that they schedule a speaking engagement at your library in between stops.

**4. What kind of support is needed for you to implement these three things? Support from your staff? Your Board of Trustees? Assistance from WVLS?**

Since returning from the conference, I've talked with the library services staff about the idea of a shared electronic spreadsheet that we could use to keep track of patron incidents, and the idea was well-received. To implement the use of such a spreadsheet, I'll next need to consult our director and get her approval, and incorporate any ideas that she may have. After that, I plan to consult our other managers, team leads and staff members from other departments to gather their input on what the document should look like and include. By doing this, I'm hoping to make the document as useful and effective as possible and get everyone invested in using it.

After creating my own crisis communication plan, I'll seek the approval of our administration team, including our director, to get it finalized and approved. I'm not certain if the document will need to be approved by our Board of Trustees or not, but will seek their approval if necessary.

Concerning the use of Edelweiss and other strategies for pursuing and booking authors for speaking engagements, it'll be up to MCPL's Library Events Coordinator Chad Dally and the rest of the Central Wisconsin Book Festival team to implement the use of those. I've already spoken to Chad and relayed all of the information I learned from the "Creating a Dynamic and Diverse Author Series" session to him, and it sounds as though he will incorporate some of those strategies into his event planning moving forward.

#### **5. How might your conference experience been improved to be more beneficial/impactful to you?**

My PLA conference experience went incredibly well and I truly can't think of any way in which it could be improved upon. The costs that otherwise would have likely prevented me from attending (registration, flight, lodging, etc.) were generously covered by the scholarship I received from WVLS. Having the financial aspect taken care of allowed me to give my full attention to choosing sessions that I wanted to attend and to think of how I could incorporate the information I learned into my work at MCPL.



The PLA conference itself was very well-organized and the convention center was well-marked and easy to navigate. The conference also provided notebooks for taking session notes and compiling thoughts and insights gleaned from the programs, and offered a free conference smartphone app that was helpful for finding sessions and walking the exhibition

hall.

I appreciated that some of the more popular conference sessions were offered more than once, which allowed attendees who were torn between two sessions to still attend many of them at later time. Attending the conference was an incredibly rewarding experience and I'm very appreciative that I was able to go.

**WVLS Post-Conference Report**  
**Julie Kinney, MCPL**

1. Please highlight three sessions from the conference.

What were the session topics? Who presented them? What made these presentations effective and meaningful to you?

The first session I'd like to highlight was the Effective Security Strategies with two librarians from the Baltimore Public Library. While they are different in many ways from our library, they face many of the same challenges that we do, especially when it comes to addressing problematic behavior. We were able to take some of their ideas and make them our own.

The second session was Tools to Tackle Digital Literacy Skilling. There were three librarians all from large library systems, as well as a consultant for AT&T. This was very interesting, because it provided a free way for patrons to work on basic digital skills. I've taken their programs and am in the process of developing several adult programs for the fall (hopefully!)

I also attended Introducing Mondo Mondays: A Practical Guide for Teaching Cultural Literacy. I didn't realize that this was a children's program and I went hoping to gain guidance in working with minority communities. However, this was a delightful program that used Mondo (a puppet) who learned about different cultures through picture books and activities. This was such a neat program that I texted the children's librarian here and told her to find them online and watch. I hope that we can offer something similar. Unfortunately, this didn't help with my questions about working with minority communities, but it was an interesting and low threat way of approaching cultural literacy.

2. Please highlight a conference experience, other than attending a conference session. Did you talk to someone you didn't know at a session? Sit next to someone at a luncheon and have a meaningful conversation? Visit with an exhibitor? How did **this** experience affect your overall outlook of the conference?

So many librarians! So many amazing hair colors! Who knew librarians were such fancy dressers! I chatted with a YA librarian from the East Coast. Those of us who signed up for the author luncheons were able to chat with librarians from Northern Oregon. I had a great visit with an exhibitor about digitization possibilities for our library. Over all, I felt very welcomed and had a great time. It was perfect for reenergizing me, and helping me understand my library better. I was able to compare where we are with other libraries and see what they were doing differently. It was eye opening to see how other libraries have started EDI conversations, and why they chose to do so. It reinforced to me that while we might have the capacity to discuss this, and I can see a definite need, we aren't quite ready to tackle such large issues, especially in the current cultural climate of Central Wisconsin. I wanted to highlight the Richland Library, where they were able to start these kinds of conversations. Their approach was interesting and definitely something that we could try in the future. I'm keeping these ideas on the back burner, for a time when I can really dig in and try and (gently) help our community discuss EDI issues.

3. As a result of attending this conference, what three things do you plan on implementing at your library in the next six months?

We have already started to implement some of the strategies for security, like starting a spread sheet to track problematic behaviors and providing some solid guidelines for discipline. I'm hoping to use the information from the Digital Literacy session to guide the creation of some specific programs targeted at new computer users and job seekers. In addition, I want to keep focused on EDI issues and figure out some ways that we as a library can help.

4. What kind of support is needed for you to implement these three things? Support from your staff? Your Board of Trustees? Assistance from WVLS?

The first two, the spread sheet and the guidelines, are already in progress! And they are very strongly supported by our director and our library services staff. I'm excited to help people improve their skills, especially if it helps them navigate the increasingly digital world.

I feel like the conversations around EDI are too big for one library to handle, so it would be awesome if we could get a group of library folks who are interested in EDI and how we can lead our communities in a good direction, toward acceptance and understanding. I think this is certainly something that can be led by WVLS. I think these conversations would be good for everyone, but especially for library staff, so they can learn and understand these issues and how their community could address them or how the library could take the lead and address them.

5. How might your conference experience been improved to be more beneficial/impactful to you?

I don't know if it could be improved!! One thing I might suggest would be to have WVLS book the rooms, so we could stay in the same hotel. It would be nice for us to have a solid "base" to start from. But I also liked being able to do things myself, like get a little lost and see things I might not have. I would have liked to see more sessions related to programming issues, especially working with minority communities, but overall, it was a much needed break for me, that really inspired me to come back and start working!

Thank you WVLS!

**WVLS Post-Conference Report**  
Elisha Sheffer, Rhinelander District Library

1. Please highlight three sessions from the conference.

What were the session topics? Who presented them? What made these presentations effective and meaningful to you?



- Queering the Library: Strategically Creating Space for the LGBTQ+ Community presented by Rebecca Oxley and Teresa Miller, as well as Students Taking Pride: Supporting GSAs in Middle and High Schools by Rebecca Oxley. I wanted to highlight these two together, as Queering the Library was really the opening door to inclusivity and Students Taking Pride was more targeted and expanded on one part of the previous session. In addition, one of the speakers presented at both sessions. Queering the Library was really eye opening as to just how important and crucial it is to provide safe, affirming places for our queer patrons, especially teens. But even more

so, there was one gentleman there who wanted to know what we can do when our community is more conservative, and we know there are LGBTQ+ patrons, but we don't know who. How can we help them? While the presenters didn't have a great answer for that, coming from a large and liberal community, I spoke with that gentleman afterwards and we talked about our communities and brainstormed what we could do to help these sorts of "invisible" patrons. While neither of us would be able to offer the full spread of programs discussed at Queering the Library, I was then able to learn more at Students Taking Pride to explore one possible avenue I could use to create an ongoing safe place for my teen patrons.

- Removing Bias and Barriers From Your Cataloging presented by Meghan O'Keefe. This was a really interesting discussion as to the effects our cataloging and shelving can have on certain topics and peoples. Specifically, it talked about the different ways certain histories, like queer history, women's history, Native American history, etc., may be cataloged in ways that seem helpful, but can actually be quite damaging. While we may think it is helpful to group queer history with our other LGBTQ+ information, it can create a sort of othering to the community, as well as whitewash our history section. It seems helpful to have all of the resources in one place, but that leaves that group out of our history, and how important it is to include all of the different histories together, so it doesn't reaffirm that history only includes and is only to be told by one group.



- The Library's Role in Equitable College Prep for Teens presented by Aryssa Damron. This session was really so great because of the sheer amount of great resources it offered. So many of the resources that I used when I was looking at college (even just a few years ago) have already become outdated or have vanished completely. Even the up-to-date books we purchase rarely go out as more and more teens shift to online resources. Being able to offer even a handful of the resources will be so helpful in getting our teens to think of the library again when doing their college-prep.

2) Please highlight a conference experience, other than attending a conference session. Did you talk to someone you didn't know at a session? Sit next to someone at a luncheon and have a meaningful conversation? Visit with an exhibitor? How did **this** experience affect your overall outlook of the conference?



Connecting with so many other librarians from across the country was such a highlight of the conference. At each session I spoke with someone from a library entirely different from ours and being able to share the similarities and differences was interesting and eye opening. Meeting with fellow catalogers from the New Eastern part of the country for lunch on Wednesday was a great way to start the conference. I would have to say, though, the biggest highlight from the conference was meeting and getting to know Jen from the Minocqua library. Not only was it a joy to get to know her, and by extent her library, but it really helped to be able to swap notes and ideas of the sessions to see how we could make some of the bigger library projects fit within our smaller, more conservative communities. It really helped to have another perspective, but one who also really understands our community and day-to-day operations.

3) As a result of attending this conference, what three things do you plan on implementing at your library in the next six months?

- I plan to begin a collection audit on the YA Nonfiction to consider the placement of certain materials within the collection, as was discussed in the session Removing Bias and Barrier from Your Catalog. I would also like to do this to our much larger adult nonfiction collection, but I will need to build an argument to justify the time it would take to tackle the project. I believe analyzing the YA will be a great starting place that I may be able to use to demonstrate the time vs. benefits of such a project.
- I really want to build our teen page on the library website to become a portal for resources. Our teens don't really come to the library for information and research, as they can access everything more conveniently on the internet. So, I would like to bring the library to them online. I want to create an online collection of resources for them to be the gateway to information. Resources on college and

career prep, gender and sexuality questioning, support, and coming out, mental health resources, moving out, etc.

- I have already begun exploring the process for starting a GSA (Gender & Sexuality Anti-bias club) at the library. I do not know that it will happen, but I have begun taking the first steps to start one and exploring ideas. Who would run the club with me, what the club would do during meetings, who would be coming to these meetings, how can we market it to them, how can we protect those coming to the meetings and make them feel validated and safe, while still proud of themselves, etc. It will be a lot of work, on all levels, to get the club going and then sustainable, but I believe it is something our local LGBTQ+ community is in desperate need of.

- 4) What kind of support is needed for you to implement these three things? Support from your staff? Your Board of Trustees? Assistance from WVLS?

The biggest support I will need for the collection assessment is time. While I can squeeze in the time to analyze the YA nonfiction, as I am already in the process of analyzing it to update our resources, it will take a lot to justify the time necessary to assess the adult nonfiction. Likewise, it will take support of staff to allow me to take the time to examine the collection. Already, it will have to wait until after the Summer Reading Program is over to allow me the necessary time to begin the process.

I have already begun talking to our Adult Services Manager to see what will need to be done with the website to allow it to support the, rather large, expansion. Right now, I don't believe it is strong enough to support this kind of buildup. I am not sure what would go into that. Likely funding, which would need support from the board and budget. I would also need help from WVLS, likely Anne Hamland, to help create the web design.

As of right now, I am in the gathering resources stage. While I have heard of GSAs before, I have no experience or really any knowledge of what the clubs do. Additionally, because it is not a school-based GSA, there are some adaptations to be made. I would really appreciate any resources and/or connections. I have the support of our staff, but I will need the support of our Board of Trustees. I plan to have the club initially be quiet and marketed by word of mouth, but it will likely be a matter of when it gets challenged, not if. While I do not doubt that the Board would see the importance of the club, I worry that they will see it as being more trouble than it is worth.

- 5) How might your conference experience been improved to be more beneficial/impactful to you?

While the conference was very inspirational and provided a lot of great resources, a lot of the sessions spoke on programs/projects that aren't really feasible in smaller/mid-sized libraries, especially in more rural, conservative communities. It really helped to have fellow WVLS members there to compare notes and bounce ideas back and forth. It was key to be able to brainstorm how we could scale down the ideas or figure out something we could do instead so that they were more feasible with our time, resources, and communities. Probably our most common topic of discussion was how we would not be able to afford the time to work on these large programs and projects, so what can we brainstorm to use that idea and inspiration to benefit our library in a practical way?

**WVLS Post-Conference Report**  
Laurie Ollhoff, T.B. Scott Free Library  
(Merrill)

1. Please highlight three sessions from the conference.

What were the session topics? Who presented them? What made these presentations effective and meaningful to you?



To be honest, it is difficult to pick only three. There were so many great sessions and many of which I was unable to attend since I was unable to clone myself. In each of the sessions, the examples that were provided and the tools that were shared will be most useful as I work to implement new ideas and revamp existing policies and procedures to benefit everyone that enters the library or attends a program.

- **Prepare Your Library for Today's Censorship Battles**

- o **Presenters:** Deborah Caldwell Stone, J.D., Director, ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom; Peter Coyl, Director, Sacramento Public Library; Megan Cusick, Assistant Director, State Advocacy, Public Policy & Advocacy, American Library Association;

and Kristin Pekoll, American Library Association/OIF

- o **Session Importance:** Presenters discussed the process they had gone through as they reacted to a challenge. They worked closely with the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom. Resources were provided and firsthand experiences were shared that will be beneficial as libraries work to be proactive to the prospective of book challenges. They shared best practices and strategies for libraries to handle the challenges This will be most useful as T.B. Scott works to develop the tools to better prepare staff for such challenges.

- **Welcoming Everyone: Creating Equitable and Inclusive Library Policies**

- o **Presenters:** Clare Membiela, Library Law Consultant, Library of Michigan; Tara Michener, Mental Health Professional, DEI Consultant, Michener Associates Counseling Center
- o **Session importance:** Presenters provides ways to Identify inclusivity and equity “red flags” that may exist in their current policies; they provided mechanisms to define stakeholders in the library who can offer insight into impacted populations in the communities; and described components of equitable and inclusive policies and shared examples.

- **Tools to Tackle Digital Literacy Skills**

- o **Presenters:** Brandy McNeil, Ph.D., Director of Adult Services, The New York Public Library; Michelle Frisque, Chief of Technology, Content and

Innovation, Chicago Public Library; Kristen Calvert, Central District Manager, Dallas Public Library; Gwen Oldham, AT&T, INC

- o **Session importance:** We have community members that seek tech help on a regular basis. The Digital Learn platform that was shared at the conference will be a useful tool that I can share with community members in need of training that will help them traverse through the digital world more confidently.  
(<https://www.digitallearn.org/>)

2. Please highlight a conference experience, other than attending a conference session. Did you talk to someone you didn't know at a session? Sit next to someone at a luncheon and have a meaningful conversation? Visit with an exhibitor? How did **this** experience affect your overall outlook of the conference?

There were so many great opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals at the PLA Conference. I found that attending the scheduled luncheons offered me the chance to converse with other librarians in person and I was happy I attended the author luncheons. We shared stories and ideas. I managed to tuck away a few ideas that I could share with our libraries in WVLS.

However, for me, I believe the experience I enjoyed the most was when I stopped at the Gale/Cengage Booth. What initially caught my eye was a new program that Gale had recently put in place. Gale announced in the fall of 2021 a program titled "Excel Adult High School" which gives adults a second chance at earning a high school education and college credits for free at participating public libraries. As the Head of Adult Services, I found this intriguing and wanted to know more about it. I spent time discussing the platform and cost with a Gale rep and was able to meet with our area rep, as well.

We already have Gale Courses available to our patrons and I wanted to investigate whether or not we could add this program to our library tool box for adults. While I know there is a cost, I believe it has potential and something our library system should investigate further.

3. As a result of attending this conference, what three things do you plan on implementing at your library in the next six months?
  - Build, improve, and grow in areas of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access with staff and through library programming: The process would include self- assessment with staff members, workshops, and conversations.
  - Prepare my library for today's censorship battles (Be proactive not reactive)
  - Revise library policies to create an equitable and inclusive library environment

4. What kind of support is needed for you to implement these three things? Support from your staff? Your Board of Trustees? Assistance from WVLS?
  - Assistance for WVLS to secure presenters for the IDEA aspects for staff and community-focused programs
  - Board support for staff development days which require library closure for a day from time to time
  - Staff buy-in to support the implementation of the IDEA guiding principles and willingness to take a proactive approach on censorship. Staff willingness to role-play and learn.
  
5. How might your conference experience been improved to be more beneficial/impactful to you?
  - I would be hard pressed to find something that would have made my experience better. It was an amazing opportunity that I am extremely grateful for as a recipient of the scholarship.
  - If I were to be lofty with my thoughts, maybe being able to meet with the keynote speakers personally would have improved the conference experience just a bit more. They were phenomenal and inspiring!



**WVLS Post-Conference Report**  
Jennifer Davis, Minocqua Public Library

1. Please highlight three sessions from the conference.

What were the session topics? Who presented them? What made these presentations effective and meaningful to you?

1. **Connecting with Teens using Discord** presented by Mieke Nielson, Teen Services Librarian, Salt Lake County Library Services - Learned how to use and utilize discord in the library with teens.

*I have been interested in learning more about discord to use with the teens at our library, specifically how to use it for Dungeons & Dragons programs and for watching movies together simultaneously. In addition to learning the aforementioned, I also am now excited about using it to form craft and fan clubs. I am intrigued by the idea shared at this session that forming one discord server and then continuously using the same server for all future events will naturally grow teen attendance to future programs as well.*

2. **The Library's Role in Equitable College Prep for Teens** presented by Aryssa Damrom, Children's Librarian, District of Columbia Public Library – Learned best practices in getting teens, parents, and teachers on board with college prep for and with teens. How providing all teens with the right tools will help ideas of accessibility and possibility take root.

*Aryssa was a very enthusiastic speaker. She shared her personal story about getting into Yale and applied meaningful and direct ways that we as librarians can show support and encouragement to our area(s) youth in ways that may not be taking place in the home or at their schools. I appreciated the resources that were shared in this session as well as the personal experiences that were shared. Expressing a "can-do" attitude along with providing a tool chest for teens approaching the college application process is something that is such a relevant and timely endeavor to support in our library!*

3. **Students Take Pride: Supporting GSAs in Middle and High Schools** presented by Rebecca Ocley, Librarian III., Prince George's County Memorial Library System – Learned practices and ways to support our middle and high school GSA's.

*This presentation was relevant for me since our local high school board is in the midst of the voting process deciding whether or not our student GSA preliminary group will officially be able to be a Lakeland Union High School GSA Club. I appreciated updated relevant information regarding GSA's, especially that they are recommending they be referred to as Gender Sexuality Alliance instead of Gay Straight Alliance.*

2. Please highlight a conference experience, other than attending a conference session. Did you talk to someone you didn't know at a session? Sit next to someone at a luncheon and have a meaningful conversation? Visit with an exhibitor? How did **this** experience affect your overall outlook of the conference?

At the last minute I signed up to attend an author luncheon as a part of the conference experience. I wasn't sure who the author was upon signing up. The author was Willy Vlautin, someone that I had never heard of. Willy spoke of libraries and how they played an important role in his life, starting back to when he was a child living with a single mother who suffered from mental illness, who never received help for this illness due to worry that her two boys would be taken from her. He shared that he didn't know who he was, what he was interested in, or what he was good at, but he knew that when sitting in a library he felt that he had a sense of "place". He shared that the librarians always were there to steer and guide. They were a quiet resource, and the library provided a much-needed respite. He then went on to share about his college days, how he had a favorite English teacher that he admired so much so that he started dressing like him. He floundered in college as well, wondering what it was that his purpose was exactly. He knew that while watching movies he would leave the experience feeling something big in his chest, those stories were powerful and while watching, he was able to disappear for a while. He felt the same about music. He played guitar, was in a couple of bands...when writing and playing songs he again was able to "disappear" for the briefest of moments but would always come back to himself and his uncertain state of affairs. He started spending more time in the library. He started writing not only more songs but stories. He shared that at one point he walked into his English professor's office and asked him just how long would a novel have to be to be considered a novel. His professor laughed and shared that he supposed something around 106 pages could be considered a novel. At that point Willy started writing books and discovered that he could disappear in the characters and in the plots of his stories. He credits libraries, librarians, his English teacher, and those that are in support of libraries.

Willy is an amazingly gifted storyteller and I teared up on more than one occasion while listening to him speak. I was able to speak with him one on one afterwards (during the book signing) and it truly was an affirming experience regarding knowing that I am in the right profession. Our jobs are so much more than checking out materials to our communities. We are safe havens for those in need. We are guardians, stewards, and are responsible for getting the right information, the perfect story, the songs that will speak to the hearts of those in need. It is truly such a responsibility and yet one of my life's biggest gifts to be a part this profession. Listening to Willy Vlautin speak was hands down the highlight of my conference experience because he was able to connect the very most bared down reasons of why it is that I love librarianship and why it is so important to others. Throughout the pandemic things were so very hard, we were stretched so thin, I wonder if some of us lost sight of the gift that our work is to our communities. Being reminded in such a beautiful way via Willy's words and stories was and always will be a true gift to me.

3. As a result of attending this conference, what three things do you plan on implementing at your library in the next six months?

1. I am planning on having conversations with our collection development team talking about how not to “other” some of our non-fiction books by placement in our catalog.
2. I’m excited about starting a discord server for our library’s teens.
3. I’m looking forward to putting into place some college supports for our communities’ teens.

4. What kind of support is needed for you to implement these three things? Support from your staff? Your Board of Trustees? Assistance from WVLS?

I am looking forward to speaking with my library director and to gauge other library employees’ interest and support of the above ideas as well as others that I have since attending the conference.

5. How might your conference experience been improved to be more beneficial/impactful to you?

There were times that while I was there, I wished that other staff from my library was there with me so that we could talk about things that we had discussed or learned in real-time. I genuinely hope that this is an opportunity for others at my library in upcoming years.

While attending the conference I was able to travel with a teen librarian at another library in our library system that I had not met before. It was an amazing experience connecting in this way with another individual within our system. It made me think that while we are good about sharing our program ideas, what things are working or not working at our respective libraries, or how we handle certain situations, we don’t get the chance to just sit down and share the day-to-day happenings at different libraries in our system. It may sound silly, but it was interesting for me to learn how Rhinelander checks in their books from their book drop, how many full-time staff they have, what their volunteers do, what their daily shifts look like depending on what their positions are, etc., etc. It also was just nice to commiserate and connect with someone who was familiar with the area that I serve.

This was a personally rewarding experience for me. I feel that not only was I able to grow within my professional wheelhouse, but as a human being, I was stretched in ways that were before unforeseen to me. I am so very appreciative to have been a PLA Conference scholarship recipient. I look forward to bringing what I have learned to my library and to the communities that I serve. Thank you for the opportunity to spread my wings, to grow, and to continue to be excited about learning within my profession!