

Intersections | GLBT Book Month: Dispatch from a Small Town Librarian



Celebrate!



GLBT
BOOK MONTH
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ALA American Library Association

By Tess Goldwasser | Do you work for a library in a small, rural, conservative community? Are you a frontline staff member there, with no managerial or administrative authority? Do you wish you could do more to make your library more inclusive to the LGBTQIA+ community, but meet with resistance?

I hope it's not just me! I've been working as a frontline staff member at a small town library for nearly a decade. I have struggled with trying to affect positive change at my library in the area of inclusivity. It can be disheartening to feel you're not supported by your library, and by extension the community that library serves. You feel like you should just give up on advocacy. But you shouldn't.

There all small things you can do to welcome LGBT folks into your library, small steps you can take to move your library and community progressively forward. Here are a few things I've done, that will hopefully inspire those in similar positions and locales to keep fighting the good fight.

Tips and tricks to being a secret librarian advocate operative:

Don't give up. This is the most important lesson I can impart upon you. For instance, when you ask "Can I do a GLBT Book Month display in June?" And your supervisor says "No." Or "Think of the children." Or "Customers will complain." Or "Why? There are no gay people here our town." You could very easily be discouraged. (And angry.) (And confused. Don't they know every Thursday is gay night at the town pub?) But don't stop asking. Ask next year, and the year after that, and the year after that. One year they might say yes. And the year after that they might say "Sure you can do that again." And it might become a tradition, and every year you can put up more rainbow flags than the

year before. The only way you'll find out is if you continue to be persistent. And if you're thinking a display is a trivial example, it's not really: A warm and friendly display can be welcoming to the LGBT folks in your community, who probably currently feel unwelcome, and it's a simple thing to start with. Sure, you want to eventually get to Drag Queen Storytime, but you should start with something simple!

Invite LGBT community partners. Like I said, your library isn't ready for Drag Queen Storytime. They may not be ready for any kind of LGBT programming yet. But that doesn't mean those programs can't still be held in your library. If your library has meeting space, reach out to groups like your local PFLAG chapter, or local schools' LGBT student groups, and let them know that they can hold meetings and host programs at your library.

Sneakily fit stuff into current programs. So you're not doing Drag Queen Storytime (yet), but you're probably doing Regular Old Storytime, right? Try to "sneak" inclusive messages into your current programs. For instance, if you're reading a book about a Mama bear and a Papa bear, maybe when you read it you just change it to be about 2 Papa bears! Or if you're reading a book about a rabbit who likes to get dirty and play sports, maybe when you read it you pointedly say it's a girl rabbit. If there are characters in a book where the gender is unidentified or irrelevant, feel free to play and change it up! Chances are kids and families won't even notice, but for that same-sex family or gender-nonconforming child who does, it will really mean a lot to them to know their librarian has their back.

Creatively encourage inclusive collection development. It's likely if your library is resistant to letting you do a display or program, they may be resistant to purchasing materials with LGBT themes. Find out the best way to reach your library's acquisitions specialists, and then request LGBT books, movies, and music – anything that's received positive reviews, or been listed on top 100 lists, or won awards. Because that will help you...

Firmly defend LGBT items in your collection. If something is challenged, be ready to listen to the complaint, and respond in a calm matter stating that your library purchases items for ALL the members of your community, and that you'd be happy to help them find other items more to their tastes. Often in these situations people just want to be heard, and are satisfied to move on when they're sure that they have been.

Be a walking, talking safe space. It's probably not likely that your library is ready to declare itself a "Safe Space" where LGBT folks, particularly young folks, can be completely safe from bullying. Even if you could get your whole staff on board, you can't control who comes into your building, and you probably can't monitor your entire building at all times, even if it is small. But that doesn't mean that you can't identify yourself as a safe person to talk to. You could wear a "Safe Space" button or, if that's against your library's dress code, even something as simple as a rainbow colored lanyard or bracelet might help to identify you, to people who are looking for you, as a safe person to turn to in times of need.

These are just a few ideas I've had and lessons I've learned over the years. Hopefully they encourage you, my fellow small town librarians, to keep advocating, despite adversity. It is worth it!

Happy [GLBT Book Month](#) everybody!

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