Author’s Note: The following story is being told with assistance and permission from the student, who is of age to grant permission. Names have been changed.

Marsha ran into the school library crying. Sobbing, really, big tears running down her cheeks. She was stomping her feet as if trying to put out a fire. As I offered her a box of tissues, I could see the big feelings that the junior couldn’t express just bubbling out of her. She stayed in my office, crying and starting to calm a little while waiting for the school psychologist to come talk with her.

Before this, Marsha came into the school library like any other student, to borrow a book or work on homework. She had started helping another student with a mural, but we didn’t know there were things bubbling beneath the surface. However, on this particular day, the school suicide prevention training triggered Marsha, so she left her class and came to a place where she seemed to feel safe.

After this, Marsha came to the school library every day. On days that were too much for her, she would lay down underneath the circulation desk and cry until she felt a little better. On days that she was handling things, she would sit near my paraprofessional and I and talk about anything and everything. We knew this was part of her process. Little by little, she opened up to us, finding times that we weren’t so busy, sometimes after school, so she could come in and talk.

One day as we were discussing the mural project, Marsha noticed that I was wearing Library Pride socks that I had received at a conference, and she noted that she really liked the rainbow stripes and wished she could wear Pride socks. Off-handedly, I showed her that they were “library” socks, and she proceeded to get very excited. A week later, I brought in a pair of Library Pride socks for her. According to Marsha, I am now her “absolute favorite adult human.”

The next day, Marsha took over the mural project and started it over according to her own vision. At first, this meant quite a lot of black, dark gray, and night colors. Our discussions as she painted were fraught with anxiety, worry, and concern. We talked about how much everyone worried about her and how hard it was to convince them that she needed time to sort through her thoughts and feelings.

More than anything else, our learners need spaces where they can stop for a few minutes, take a breath, play a game of cards, have a good cry, read for fun, or whatever brain release they need.

The stories of how we directly impact the lives of our students are as important as the data about the number of classes taught and the number of books circulated, if not more so.

Health and Healing in the School Library

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and especially our learners. We feel as if we have been going non-stop for eighteen months, and we have not yet been able to process most of our feelings about any of it. We are tired. My district was lucky enough to have in-person school for the entire 2020–2021 school year, and I know many others have been virtual or hybrid for part or all that time. There are a lot of things that have changed, but the relationships we have with our learners are still the most important part of all of this. It is the relationships we build that make our spaces the safe spaces that our learners need.

More than anything else, our learners need spaces where they can stop for a few minutes, take a breath, play a game of cards, have a good cry, read for fun, or whatever brain release they need. No matter who they are, how they identify, or what they are going through, we are their space. Not everyone has the same story as Marsha, but our school libraries should always be available when people like Marsha need us.

As we tell the stories of our services and our spaces in the upcoming year, these are the stories we need to tell, respecting privacy and confidentiality, of course. The stories of how we directly impact the lives of our students are as important as the data about the number of classes taught and the number of books circulated, if not more so. Our school libraries should be places for our learners to find safety, respect, and assistance to help them heal.

Jennisen Lucas (she/her/hers) is the 2021–2022 AASL President. She is the district librarian for Park County School District #6 in Cody, Wyoming. She earned her MLS from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2003, and earned National Board Certification for 2006–2026. She has been chair of the Wyoming School Library Interest Group and has held and chaired multiple AASL committees.