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Creatively Creating Communities Strengthens Connections

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No school librarian is successful in a vacuum. We can't just sit in our offices (if we have one!) and keep to ourselves. We need to find ways to make connections. We need to create communities of learners, linking up with a wide variety of people.

For most of us, we are the only school librarian in our building. In my twenty-year career, I was always a solo school librarian. In my last position, which lasted six years, I didn't even have the luxury of a library aide. To make connections and create community connections, I often had to think outside of the box.

When I took over a high school position where there was virtually no culture of classroom teachers collaborating with the school librarian, I was desperate for a way to get students and staff into the beautiful space of the library media center. Inspired by a Listening Lunch program I had read about that took place at a Massachusetts high school, I came up with a similar idea: Live at the LMC! After getting permission from my principal, I approached our two performing-arts teachers and asked if they would be willing to work with me to schedule bimonthly performances in the library media center featuring student and staff performers. They loved the idea of giving their students a chance to showcase their talents, and the program was a huge hit. Teachers signed up to bring their classes to the LMC for twenty-minute performances. Student performers included not only instrumentalists and vocalists, but also young people who did poetry recitations and a comedy skit. Several staff members showed off their talents as well, including

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a world languages teacher who was a talented mime. The performances drew large crowds of both students and staff into the school library—people who would otherwise rarely come into the space.

Tying into the issue theme "Opportunity for Community," the contributors to this issue of *Knowledge Quest* have shared what they've done in their school libraries to benefit learners and the broader community. As you read their articles, you will see that these librarians were also not afraid to think outside the box. They have demonstrated that we need to expand our concept of what a community is, and seize that new understanding as an opportunity to make our programs more visible as we support learners. Each of the contributors has taken the challenges we all have faced over the past three years and used them as opportunities to raise the visibility of the school library—and its librarian—within their communities, whatever those communities may be. The first Common Belief in the AASL Standards states: "The school library is a unique and essential part of a learning community" (AASL 2018, 11). It's up to us to be creative about who makes up those communities and how we can interact with them.

The content experts for this issue Matt King and Jenna Kammer set the tone with their article about the importance of school library-led community engagement. For example, one way the Missouri Association of School Librarians helped shift the focus on school libraries from one of negativity to positivity was to create an “I Love My Library” contest. Students throughout the state submitted short essays on the topic, with the winners’ school libraries receiving \$250 prizes to buy books. In addition to giving examples of how school libraries have risen to challenges, King and Kammer also provide a list of suggestions on how to strengthen our school libraries by engaging with our communities.

As anyone who has had therapy dogs at their school knows, the eyes of students and staff always light up when animals visit. Stephanie Persson’s students were not only dealing with the effects of the pandemic but also had to deal with gun violence that resulted in a student being shot and killed in one of the school district’s parking lots. After reading Jarrett J. Krosoczka’s autobiographical graphic novel, *Hey, Kiddo*, Persson came up with the idea for a “Healing through Literature, Art, and Goats” program. The program, described in her article, was funded by an AASL Inspire Special Event grant, and got a wide range of staff members involved, including the school counselors, who held small-group discussions with students after reading Krosoczka’s book. The goat visit didn’t turn out exactly as planned, but the program was still a big hit.

Jen Gilbert was also worried about the effects of remote learning and isolation on her students during the pandemic, and, like Persson, she made good use of an ALA grant. Gilbert used the grant to purchase 156 titles—many of which were selected by students—and then met with learners in small groups to discuss the books. The themes of the books served as springboards to other discussions, helping the students regain and relearn the social skills they had struggled with after returning to in-person learning. Her article describes how by using literature focused on compassionate empathy she was able to help her students emotionally.

Nothing engages students more than authentic learning opportunities. Amanda Hurley’s article describes how a collaboration with a math teacher has resulted in a semester-long project with Advanced Geometry students. Hurley, who along with her math teacher colleague Sarah Zehnder, was the 2021 recipient of AASL’s Collaborative School Library Award, also provides a useful list of ways to facilitate collaboration and build relationships with a variety of different communities. The projects Hurley and Zehnder do each year with the Advanced Geometry students get the public library, the local university, and

school district officials involved, connecting all of these communities with their own school.

The scope of the communities we create is limited only by the scope of our imagination. That is evident in Valerie Rupe DiLorenzo’s article, which also features expanding our idea of community far beyond our own school walls. While she describes several student-centered initiatives inside her own school, she also writes about several initiatives involving not only her own students, but students from around her state. A consistent theme of her article is the importance of making sure our community includes not only our students, but also our students’ voices. DiLorenzo describes how she found innovative ways to get her students engaged in taking ownership of their school library.

As we move forward, still trying to recover from the challenges of teaching during a pandemic and with even more challenges ahead, we need to continue to be creative in getting as many stakeholders as possible in our communities involved with our library programs. The more we do so, the more we can raise our positive profile, support our learners, and give us more support going forward. The authors in this issue have shown us the way.

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