

*Mirroring Community in the Library: Growing momentum for Tribal libraries and Tribal librarianship*

*Aaron LaFromboise*

*ALA-Annual Conference 2021*

*Introduction by Elizabeth Brumfield, ODLOS Advisory Committee Chair*

Thank you for joining us virtually for the Jean E. Coleman Outreach Lecture Series. I am Elizabeth Jean Brumfield, Distance Services Librarian and Head of the NWHC, John B. Coleman Library of Prairie View A&M University. I am currently chair of the Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services Advisory Committee.

The Jean E. Coleman Library Lecture is presented each year during the American Library Association's Annual Conference.

The namesake, Dr. Jean E. Coleman was the first director of the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS), now the Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services (ODLOS), which sponsors this event. This lecture series is a fitting tribute to Dr. Coleman's work to ensure that all citizens, particularly Native Americans and adult learners, have access to quality library services. The lecture series continues to teach library professionals more about their roles in providing equity of access.

The invited lecturer for 2021 is Aaron LaFromboise. She is currently the Director of Library Services at Medicine Spring Library, the academic library for Blackfeet Community College and the community library/archives for the Blackfeet Nation. Aaron is the first tribal member to hold the library director position at the college. Aaron is actively involved in creating community within the Medicine Spring Library and has implemented new programming for children, pre-teens, college students, and community members. Through her leadership, Medicine Spring Library received the 2018 Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums Institutional Excellence Award for creating a safe and enjoyable environment within the Blackfeet Tribal community. Aaron is a 2014 ALA Emerging Leader, sponsored by the American Indian Library Association, a former commissioner for the Montana State Library (2014-2020), serves on the ALA Presidential Committee for Julius Jefferson Jr., and is the American Indian Library Association Vice-President.

We thank her for her commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion and look forward to her presentation.

*Abstract:*

As a young person, being a librarian was never an option, not because the doors were closed, but because the librarians I grew up with did not represent who I was as a person. Finding a Tribal librarian in a Tribal community may be more common than when I was a child, but not every Tribal community feels comfortable within the library. Representation matters, and in

Tribal communities representation is vital to an active and thriving library. Through advocacy on a national level for educating Tribal librarians, to introducing the importance of Tribal representation in all libraries, to creating a Tribal library that extends cultural norms of my Amskapii Piikani community, there are many ways to ensure that Indigenous peoples see a mirror within the library institutions that serve their communities.

In 2011, during the Tribal College Librarians Institute, I met Omar Poler. At the time Omar was a library school student at the University of Wisconsin. This was also my first TCLI and so I really don't remember a whole lot about it, other than my eyes were opened to what tribal librarianship might be. I had decided to pursue a library degree with the encouragement of the Dean of Academic Affairs, months after I started my library technician job at Blackfeet Community College. This encounter in a space for librarians who served Native students at Tribal Colleges, would mean more to me than I would have realized at the time.

Frankly, before the Dean of Academic Affairs suggested I get a library degree, I thought of librarianship as a job for old white ladies. I have had a long history with working within the library. In high school I worked my junior and senior year in the school library. The librarian was married to a tribal member and so was kind of a member of the community. Her family lived in the border town 35 miles from Browning, a refuge for the white teachers working on the reservation. I loved working with her, she taught me how to copy catalog, I got to assist with selecting materials from a donation, I got to interact with my peers as I checked materials out and helped them use the library, and I started a Library Club. This first experience working in the library had a big impact on me.

You may think that this experience would carry with me, and I would be an avid library user out in the wider world. Sadly, when I went to Dartmouth right out of high school, I used two small libraries for assignments, but always felt overwhelmed when I would walk by the doors of the main library. The year I spent in Hanover, I didn't even step foot inside, not even to check it out. After my year away I moved home and after a year off I started school at Salish Kootenai College. I qualified for work study and I went straight to the library to ask to work there. Not being from the community, I didn't realize that the librarian was Native. Carlene was older, had just recently received her library degree from the University of Washington, and the little I learned of her experience in college only solidified the idea that librarians were all old ladies (sorry Carlene, my youth made me think that everyone over 40 was old).

As a work study student in the tribal college library, I felt like a lifeline for my classmates. I would assist people with their math homework, I was always happy to help them find a book, and I often got into trouble because I tried to assist with research online. The only people who were identifiably Native to me was the receptionist, and one of the library technicians. Not knowing the librarian, the work situation reminded me of the high school library, where the only Blackfeet person was the library assistant. An assistant that I didn't even pay attention to. This is the time I decided that I would maybe get a library degree and work in a library after I retired. It's kind of funny to remember how my twenty year old brain worked.

Time wore on, I graduated from SKC, tried and failed twice to complete a Bachelor's Degree, and when I was 26 I moved home feeling like I failed in life. Moving home was the tonic for my mental anguish, it was a salve for the open wound in my mind, soothing away the self sabotaging thoughts, and helping me heal from a major depressive episode. Home. It was a

place where I was completely loved, where my family cared for me, where I was able to return the favor as my grandparents aged. It was a place where I could get a job to help out a cousin because her veterinary assistant got hurt. I didn't realize that leaving the wider world, a disgrace in my own mind, would be the way to open doors to the wider world.

Eventually I got a job at the college library. I observed the librarian alienating students and community members. I made a pact with the other library technician that we would turn the image of the library around on campus. We worked so hard to do that. The statistics showed that our efforts were working. Looking back, I wonder if the shift in library usage was because we went to every student event to introduce the library and invite students to come in? Was it because we chose to make sure we smiled and said hello to every person who walked in the doors? Was it a mix of those efforts coupled with the fact that at the front desk students saw people who looked like them? I may never know if it was our mere presence that lured people into the library, or if it was the conscious efforts made.

After that first Tribal College Librarians Institute, I met a handful of Native librarians, I met Native library school students, and I met many non-Native librarians. My own boss was a person who had worked the majority of her career on a different reservation. A person who didn't realize her faux pas of constantly comparing that reservation and its people to the place she was working. She never saw that some of her cute and endearing stories about working with the Native children on that reservation were fairly insulting and kind of racist. She tried very hard, but just didn't understand that her presence was a barrier to student and community participation. I felt like I was always at odds with her, and as I met the other tribal college librarians, I worried that my experience was happening across Indian Country.

Through hard work I completed my Bachelor's degree online while working full time at the library. I immediately applied for graduate school and was accepted to the University of Wisconsin. I was able to meet Omar Poler again, he had graduated and was now working within the department on the "Culture Keepers" grant. He introduced me to Janice Rice, a Native librarian at the college. This was my first, true introduction to a world with Native American librarians. This one evening of conversation opened my eyes to the challenges and joys of being an Indigenous librarian.

Later that semester, Omar called me at work and asked if I wanted to be a 2014 Emerging Leader, sponsored by the American Indian Library Association. I said yes right away. I also worried that I was getting in on a technicality, that I didn't apply for the larger program, that I was taking a spot from someone else who deserved it. I'm so happy that I said yes anyway. I was the only Emerging Leader without a library degree. My group didn't know any tribal librarians, I'm sure they didn't know any Native people, or have experience working with Indigenous people in their libraries. I started a cycle of introducing them to the idea that they might have Native patrons.

One of the things we were taught in the Emerging Leaders program was to have a bigger goal. To create an elevator speech to make sure that you could express that goal quickly and with impact. I immediately knew what my elevator pitch was, that Tribal people should be running Tribal libraries. That communities would respond and build trust within the library when they recognized and related to the person making the decisions, not just the people at the front desk. Emerging Leaders offered me a chance to practice that elevator speech when I had the opportunity to speak for a minute with then ALA President Barbara Stripling. I'm not sure she

heard my message, but the idea that I was able to tell the President of ALA about the need I've seen in Indian Country empowered me immensely.

This is a message I have brought to the Tribal College Librarians Institute. A message I have been able to encourage in many tribal library circles. A message that is being heard. A message that carries so much more weight than it might look like on the surface. A message that didn't start with me, and will not end with me. This message isn't only about educating and employing tribal librarians, it is at its core, about tribal communities, about tribal people throughout the world.

What can be accomplished with a tribal librarian? It helps those in the community, whether reservation or urban, be seen. It builds trust in an institution that has done little to earn the trust of Indigenous people. In my own community, we have seen the rise in library usage, but more importantly we have seen true participation in shaping the collection, we have seen a rise in trust. Tribal members are entrusting the archives with personal documents, photographs, stories. We are building a space that preserves our history in the way that makes sense to us. Others may come into the library and our arrangement of materials may not make sense to them, but every change that is made is made with the help and support of the people who live here. The people who have family stories buried within the books. People who help me build a vision of how our library can support oral history without taking the most important part out of it, the people. I feel like there is still a way to go with my community, that trust is not a prize to win, to own, it is a living thing that I will need to gain over and over again. It is work that is worthwhile, exciting, anything but institutional.

I've been the library director for almost five years, and the difference in library participation from the previous seven years as a library technician is palpable. My dream is bigger than me, it's bigger than my community. I hope that all tribal people, that all tribal communities, can build libraries that matter to them, that libraries are not seen as an institution, forced upon us as a part of assimilation. The librarian who married into the tribe, or who has lived in the community their whole lives, or who has worked with other tribes can build trust, can build a community space, but I believe that the true tribal library is led by more than ALA accredited doctrine. Traditionally the Piikani foundation was not in a structure, but within the people themselves. An attentive researcher might come to that conclusion, but it is hard to understand something that wasn't passed to you in your DNA.

Representation is more than an Indigenous body sitting behind a desk. Representation is more than a good idea, it can be a lifeline. I do not claim credit on these statistics, but, in the five years since I earned my MLIS, there has been an emergence of Blackfeet librarians on the reservation. Out of the eight professional positions, three are now filled by tribal members. There are also at least six or seven tribal members working on either a library degree, or a library endorsement to work within the public schools. When I attend TCLI, I see so many more tribal librarians, and as I follow their work, I am convinced that it wasn't a failure from non-Native predecessors, it is the success of tribal people within their communities.

Next steps include building pathways for Native people to lead their libraries. Working with Tribes themselves to understand the potential of a professional librarian, the importance of tribal libraries. There should be funding that is flexible and responsive to each different tribal nation's needs. There should be a bigger foundation for urban librarians and urban Indigenous communities. There is a need for research, not to prove to others what we see, but to give us

the ability to make tribal libraries better, the ability to serve Native communities better. There needs to be representation for the future story keepers, the future community builders, the future, period.