

Interviewee: Marie L. Mueller
Interviewer: Raymond Furgal
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Abstract: Marie Mueller is currently the Library Director at the Bigelow Free Public Library in Clinton, MA. She is known at work for her ability to perform any task that the library needs at any time. In the interview Marie puts a large focus on her work life including daily routines, and procedures she undergoes which help her to be successful in her field of work. She stresses that many have a misinformed judgment of the library and wants people to realize that the library isn't the boring field most people believe it is. Marie also discusses her education, which includes obtaining a Master's Degree in Publishing and a Master's Degree in Library Information Science, which helped get her where she is now. She elaborates on how essential it is for women to follow their dreams and pursue true happiness in all aspects of life. The interview concludes with Marie providing advice for women who may be interested in pursuing a career in this line of work.

MM: Hello, my name is Marie Mueller and I am the Director of the Bigelow Library in Clinton.

RF: And what does your job consist of on a daily basis?

MM: Pretty much a little bit of everything... You know sometimes I have to be the custodian, if the custodian doesn't come in. Sometimes I've been known to read stories, but I don't do that very often though, because we have a pretty decent children's area. But I have read for story time. I read programs. I do circulation. I mean, what's the stuff you think about? "Oh, you check out books, you have time to read all day!" Not true, I wish I had time to read all day, but, you know, you can't be a librarian if you read all day. I deal with a lot of people. I deal a lot with people who work here, people who don't work here. It's always an adventure here in the library, believe it or not, it's kind of not quite the place everyone thinks it is. Yesterday we called the police.

RF: You called the police yesterday?

MM: Yeah, there was a guy unresponsive, so we called 911 first and we said, "He's not responding, he's not responding." And all of a sudden, he got up and had some choice words for us and went back to sleep.

RF: Was he just sleeping?

MM: No, it turns out he was drunk. He was literally passed out. So, the police kind of wandered in and they're like, "Oh Eric, what are you doing here? You know you're not supposed to be drinking, and there is an open bottle law and blah blah blah." And, of course, he goes, "Well I just got my medication." And then they walked him out. So that was—you know, that was yesterday's exciting experience.

RF: It's not always relaxed here, I guess.

MM: No, not always. I think though it's not typical, I mean we're a small library. I sort of go into other libraries and go, "Oh well, it doesn't look so bad." But I think, and I hear this from other libraries, is that there's a lot of --- I mean we get homeless people during the day. In Clinton there's a lot people who may not own computers, and they come here to use the computers. It's not books, it's really computer use. "Can you show me how to do a resume? Can you help me look for jobs? Can you help me do this?"

RF: They ask you to do that?

MM: Sometimes. Not me personally, because I always say, "No, it's not my job." But there are things I am much better at helping them with and depending on who's on at the front desk... If I'm at the front desk, generally that means that everyone else is busy and I can't help them. But there are times in the day, where the staff will spend an hour with somebody showing them how to get an email and how to find software that's kind of like a resume template. There are some stories I really love about this. We had some guy, he had never used a computer before. He was a mechanic his whole life. And he comes in like, "I got laid off." And he taught himself how to use a computer. He was here every day for six months, then got two job offers in one day, and never came back. It was kind of a nice... friendly guy, and it was kind of a nice story of what the library can do for you. And then there are those kinds of people who come in everyday and don't look for jobs. It's different, there's a woman who comes in everyday and is very politically active and she uses our computer. She never owns her own computer, emails to people about some kind of activism. I don't know what her focus is, but she lobbies basically and so she's always writing emails to politicians or she's sending letters or she's printing out things. She's here every day, too. And then there are people who just come in because they're lonely.

RF: So, it's a very dynamic work environment. Because when people think of a library, books and more books, but it's very different.

MM: It is very different, definitely. There are people, you know, usually in the morning outside in their cars using the Wi-Fi. There are definitely all classes of people who hang out here and it's non-discriminatory. I would like to believe that it should be welcoming to everybody, no matter what. Sometimes we wish that it was a little more discriminatory, but, for the most part, anyone can come in and use the computer and take out a book or something

RF: But you do welcome all comers within reason.

MM: Well, there are some people who don't know how to behave, but we do try to sort out things that happen, and the police in Clinton are good, too. We had this staff day and one of the detectives came over and he said, "Look, if they're here all day we know who they are. You know what I mean, like if you know their name, we know their name. Just call us and we'll take care of it." So, I mean that is nice to know working in a small town thing.

RF: You do try to help as many people as you possibly can?

MM: In a library sort of way, like I can't do someone's taxes, I can't do--- you know what I mean. I'm not going to help someone apply for a job. I'm not going to write their letter for them. You know, we just don't have that kind of staff, we don't have that kind of facility. Sometimes I make mistakes, but I think if we had staff available, I think it would be a lot easier to do that kind of stuff, kind of sit down and say, "Look you've never had a computer, let's get started." But if I'm at the front desk, I usually say, "I'm the only one here. I'm sorry, but I need to stay here". Although that is kind of fun, helping people at the desk is when I get to see people. If I'm stuck here, you know nothing is wrong with that, but it would be kind of missing the whole point.

RF: What was your education like?

MM: Which part? Like pre-college or after college?

RF: I would say a little bit of pre-college, but mostly during college and afterward.

MM: Wait I just want to say one thing. I worked as a page, which is the lowest level library [position], you know, putting away books in high school. I volunteered there when I was in middle school because my parents said, "Fine if you're not going to camp, then become a volunteer." So, I volunteered at the library, and then so two years later I got a job at the library. And the most exciting thing for me was when Robert Cormier would come in. He lived in Leominster [Massachusetts]. That wasn't where I was working, but he would come into our library because it was smaller. And when I saw him, I was kind of floored because you see his picture in the back of the book, like the *Chocolate War*, and I would see his name on his library card. And I never talked to him, and I'm always sorry now that I never talked to him. But I was just so overwhelmed, like there's a real- life famous author in our library, right? So, I went to college in upstate New York and I went to graduate school in New York City and then later in my thirties I went to library school in New Jersey.

RF: So, this was a life thing for you?

MM: No, it wasn't. Actually, when I quit working as a page, I was like, "I'm done with libraries, I don't want to be a librarian," and I moved overseas to Taiwan to teach English, which I wasn't very good at either. It's like I don't like teaching, and again when I went back to librarian school, I was teaching at Mount Wachusett Community College, and library instruction

was my favorite part of the job. So, you just never know. This is a great job. I love it, being a librarian. It's the right sized library, I don't know if I would have done it in a different place.

RF: It's like a niche, right?

MM: I don't know if it's a niche, I mean there are public libraries, I worked in a law library, I worked in a college library. I thought I wanted to be a medical librarian, but I never quite made it in there. There are business and private libraries. I mean, there are so many different--- public libraries are what people think about when they think of a library, but obviously there are business libraries and all sorts of school libraries and lots of school librarians.

RF: But you find it better to work at a public one, like a small public one?

MM: It fits my skill set, let's just put it that way. I mean, I did like working in the college, I liked teaching, it was a skill set I didn't know I had. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed working with the students, I enjoyed working with the professors, but I couldn't do all the fun stuff I get to do here, like programs. We have a lot more programs than, let's say, a college library. We have musicians, we have story time stuff, we have art programs. We have stuff that maybe a normal college library doesn't have. I tried [while working at a college library], but it was not really ... they were not really engaged. The library was where you went to do your work, and then went home. It wasn't where you went to meet a musician or something because really when you think about it, college has so many other outlets for that. Actually, I had an interview at a prison library, too. That would have been cool.

RF: A prison library?

MM: Yeah, prisons have libraries. I think the only reason I got an interview was because of my law library background. They assumed I knew something about law, which I didn't. But that's really what prison librarians are, it's like being a paralegal. Because a lot of prisoners are looking up how to get this case appealed or something. I didn't really find the law library overly stimulating. It was kind of dark and oppressive.

RF: Well it tends to be. So, you do have a way to keep people engaged here through programs and stuff.

MM: Yeah, that's our goal is to get people in the library. A lot of libraries have to work together so, you know, a little in Clinton because so... Massachusetts is very unusual because every town has a library no matter how small. So, [in] New Jersey, the towns near New York all have their libraries, but as you move farther out west, there are county libraries. So, Sussex County, I'm using them as an example, has maybe 20 towns and five branch libraries. Libraries are not downtown, like Clinton's library is downtown, Worcester's library is downtown. Libraries are, in general, downtown. So, when people are downtown, they just walk to the library. But when we first moved to Sussex County, the downtown of the town, which was also kind of a weird

downtown, but where's the library? What kind of town doesn't have a library? Well, the library was on this road with no house. There was nothing on this road. It was just a place between one town and another town. And it was not an easy--- you had to go there down this road--- even the librarians--- you couldn't just walk somewhere to lunch. You really had to make an effort to go and see it. So, it was sort of an eye opener. And the more I learned about libraries, the more I realized we were very unusual in that we are... You know, every town has its own [library]. And it has its benefits, not benefits because it's the opposite of a benefit [not having a library in town]. Like our personality is very different from Lancaster's personality, and we will never be a library that fits in Lancaster. As much as I'd like us to be able... [to fit in Lancaster] we don't have the same demographic. What do people read here? People don't read a lot of nonfiction here. What do people want? They want to use the computers, they want help on resumes, they want help on that. I'm not sure what Lancaster's personality is, but they're much bigger. They might have the same personality we do, but they're so much bigger. Plus, they have branches. But I don't know how they, do they have central purchasing? Does Worcester Central buy all the books? I'm getting off topic a little bit. I know this because my sister, where she lives they have county libraries and they have a little library they can walk to, but it's a county system. And their branch librarian, or their director of their library, has no control over what he or she can purchase. It has to go through central and central isn't interested in maybe the personality of their little library. I've noticed that more and more libraries are offering museum passes, but that's a very New England thing. So, out in New Jersey I proposed it to my director and she said, "Why would a museum do that, why would they sell you a pass, and nobody in town is going to use it. They all have plenty of money." Tell you what, that pass---there was a huge waiting list for it because they had never seen it like this before. "Wow, we have a pass to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and a pass to the American Museum of Natural History." And now both of them have a pass. So how are we going do this? Well, we will give you a business pass membership, I forget what they called it, but you know what I mean and an institutional membership. And I check sometimes, and they still have them, and I think other libraries are catching on outside of New England. And I mean, it's great when people leave and say, "Hey, how can we bring something from here to here and share?" Librarians are all about sharing. Alright again, off topic. But I think that's some of the great things about libraries, and I do know that maybe I didn't want to be a librarian, but wherever I moved, I always got a library card.

RF: A naturally inquisitive mind...

MM: Or just a reader, and you know, I even went to the public library in Taipei in Taiwan, but it was all in Chinese, so it didn't really help too good. But I did go to the embassy library. Anyway, but again, not quite the same thing.

RR: So where did you go to college?

MM: Which time? I went to lots of different ones.

RF: For your four-year degree.

MM: My four-year degree, Skidmore.

RF: Where's that?

MM: Upstate New York.

RF: What about your master's?

MM: Which one? I went to NYU [New York University] and I went to Rutgers in New Jersey. I like school.

RF: No that's fine. Did you get a PhD?

MM: I did not. I have thought about it. But I don't really---there's not a real purpose unless-- I would have to want to be the head of a university library, I don't really need one. Although even the head of a university library, would be like two masters' degrees versus two PhD's, and I'm not sure I want to do that.

RF: You have two masters' degrees?

MM: I do.

RF: In what subjects?

MM: Library Science is one of them and the other one is a...The division doesn't even exist anymore. I believe it was a part of NYU, but it's a division I don't believe exists anymore, but it was Publishing, which sounded like a good idea at the time. But I didn't actually really work in publishing. I just got my degree and moved on.

RF: So, because this is a Worcester Women's Oral History Project, have you ever faced any discrimination when growing up or in your work field because you are a woman or...?

MM: No, not ---I don't think so I do know before I became a librarian, I worked in the printing industry which is the polar opposite of libraries. Libraries are primarily female, but people in printing are primarily male. Never a line in the bathroom when I went to trade jobs. But like specifically about libraries? You know, what it's hard for me to say because I don't know if someone didn't hire me because I was female. I never went that far. I just kind of moved on and said, "Well, they didn't hire me because I didn't have the skills," and moved on. I never harped on it as being a female thing. Maybe I should, be like everybody else. You know either you have the skills, or you don't. I would like to believe they hire you because of your skills, and not because of your gender, and so call me naïve.

RF: Well, I wouldn't call you naïve, two masters' degrees... As someone who's in college, two masters' degrees are impressive.

MM: Well they weren't right after the other, they were ten years apart. I think it makes me a better librarian, not that I had two masters' degrees, but that I had a non-library career.

RF: I think, as my high school put it, a more rounded person.

MM: Well, I think in general I would say that probably a librarian---don't get me wrong, it's a great job, but it's not for everybody. I also think that I was not by any means the youngest person in my group, nor was I the oldest person in my group. So, there were people---a lot of teachers went back to school to be librarians. It was a woman, who I think has retired as a teacher, who went back to school to be a librarian. There were a couple of people right out of college. You know, I'm not sure everybody has a clue what they want to do when they get out of college. I mean some people do, I guess it depends on your career choice. But for me, it was not where I wanted to be. But I did end up here after all. Crazy things.

RF: So, would you recommend a job like this to others who are interested in how a library works, maybe even writing to a degree?

MM: Well, that's the part that I love about this, I made the job what I wanted it to be. Well, the woman who had been here before, and I don't want to knock her. I don't know her. I never met her, but she was here a long time and she was very reluctant to move forward into--- you know, we're...Do you go the public library in Oxford? You go to your school library, right?

RF: There's a school library and I have one in my hometown, yeah.

MM: What school do you go to?

RF: Assumption College.

MM: Okay, I saw that, I don't know why I forgot. But if you go to the library and check, everything is computerized now, the card catalog is computerized, everything is online. Well, she was a little reluctant to go-- I mean I got here a few years ago so not too long ago. And everything was still on card catalogs, not going computerized. There weren't any programs, they weren't open at night. She was just an old school librarian. Again, nothing wrong with that, but it didn't really matter what I did because it was going to be so much more forward thinking than before. And I made it what I wanted it to be. And that seems to be working, although there are things I can't change, like the personality of the town. So, I sound like kind of a snoot, don't I? I'm going to come off really bad in this interview. I loved what I've done to the library, my trustees love what I've done to the library. And my trustees now are no longer old retired people who want to live in the past. They're all very forward thinking and that's great. It's great for Clinton because Clinton is very forward thinking. Even the town administrator has said it's great

that now we have new people in all these... Now we have a new director at the senior center, a new director of parks and recreation, a new director of the library. New, meaning not been there for 20 years. And so, we have new ideas, different ideas, come from out of town things. You know you stay in one place too long, whether you're a librarian or whatever, you get stagnant. Maybe you don't keep up with everything. And I said this when I got hired, "I'll see how I feel in five years." I said I'm not going to get stuck doing things the same way, stick in one place for too long. I know turnover rate maybe isn't that great for everybody, but at the same time you have to stay forward thinking. And sometimes if you get in a little rut, whatever your focus is teachers, God they're notorious, you never... What I mean is you don't grow as a person, and then you don't grow as an institution, and then your employees don't have a chance to grow. It's kind of... you have to make this your mission. My mission in life, I guess if I had a mission, is to constantly be learning. Whether it's about my profession or another country or whatever, that's my goal, is to do new things and to learn in a sort of way that is useful.

RF: Yeah, to grow.

MM: Yes, to grow because you know really, you're about... You're in college, you're young. But eventually you just realize that school is fun. Learning is fun. My daughter does not yet realize that it's fun. It is fun because sitting around doing the same thing every day is boring. No, I envy college students because you do have this opportunity to learn all sorts of new things and I understand you do it within a structure of, I have to take these core classes, you have to do this, you have to do these assignments. But on the other hand, you do have some flexibility to learn something maybe that is completely out of what you were expecting.

RF: To open yourself up to things that you might be interested in, but you didn't really know you were interested in them...

MM: Right. A couple things recently my daughter found out that I... She's 14, so whatever I did is totally before she came. But I told her some things and she's like, "You did that?" And I was like, "Yeah." And she asked why I don't still do it and I just moved on, found something else to do or whatever. And it's so rare that I can impress her. It's so gratifying. Anyway so, that's my goal, I guess my mission in life, is to leave the world better, leave the library better than... You know if I'm still here in five years, then great. And if I'm not, that's fine too.

RF: You'd rather be a part of the solution than a part of a possible issue.

MM: Yeah, I don't want to be the person that the trustees are saying "God, how do we get her out of here?" You know, I want to be the active person saying, "Alright it's time for me to leave, we need new blood or whatever."

RF: It's important in this era of technology and social diversity to always continue to modernize and try to be open to new things and new ideas.

MM: Yeah, I'm with you on that. You feed me, that's good.

RF: Thank you! So, I know that you're a busy person, this was a really good interview. I loved when you started talking about what your goal was in life. I thought that was beautiful. So thank you.

MM: You're welcome. I'm sorry George couldn't make it. Are you done?

RF: Do you have anything more to add?

MM: No, I'm fine. It's not an hour, you'll have a much easier time typing it.

RF: It'll be fine.

MM: Alright, hey are you local? You go to Assumption, but are you from central Massachusetts?

RF: I dorm at Assumption, but I'm from Oxford.

MM: Oh yeah, Clara Barton was born there.

RF: Yeah, they have monuments and street signs.

MM: So, we had a woman do a reading. She's a reenactor and she basically acted out Clara Barton [’s life]. And she answered questions, and she dressed as Clara Barton, and it was pretty cool. And people really enjoyed that. So, thinking of programs that have historical importance, that's sort of my thing. This year, oh you don't really care, but off topic, I thought we were done but I'm not, but I wrote a grant. And I had never written a grant before, and we won it. And now I have to do all the paper work involved with a grant, but I have to administer the grant and do the programs with the grant. And this gave me an opportunity to work, talking about working with other people in town, and it's that kind of thing that more and more people like. I was at a thing last night. Parks and recreation were doing a *What Was Happening in Clinton*, and it was sparsely attended which was sad. But I had people come over to my table and say, "I didn't know we had a library." My God, how did you not know? How could you not? Why do you not know? It's free entertainment, books are free, computers are free, except printing and faxing you have to pay for that. But we don't even charge overdue fines. The only thing that costs is if you lose it or break it or whatever. Why would you not come to the library?

RF: They're from Clinton, correct? They didn't even know?

MM: Didn't even know we had a library. So, that's what I mean by the old school thinking. People who come in for library cards, they just moved here, "Oh, we always come to the library." People---my trustees, I heard a story from one of my trustees, she's like, "My neighbor

didn't even know we had a library," and they [the neighbor] buy all their school books instead. Like you're crazy [the neighbor]. Do you know how much money you'd save than spend it on Amazon? So, I try to have the latest movies, the latest books, everything that people could possibly want without spending a lot of money on Amazon or Barnes and Noble or whatever. If we had an independent bookstore, I'd shop there, but we don't.

RF: So quickly and I'm going to talk because I'm interested, but you mentioned historical programs. I'm a biology major, but I do love history. One thing I loved about history is that it's a story, a multitude of stories, but it's really just a story.

MM: Not that I taught it in school, but yes it can be.

RF: And I just thought of a parallel where a lot of what's in a library, whether its fiction or non-fiction, it's really a multitude of stories. So that is one way I am interested in literature, libraries, and historical events. I just wanted to put that out there.

MM: Of all the sciences, biology is my favorite. If I had to major in science, that's the one I'd choose. Never took chemistry, and physics was just too complicated. But education is my extended family, really value libraries and education and stuff. I think it would have been hard for me to grow up not liking libraries. I became a librarian, it was irrelevant, that was kind of something I came to if I got laid off of my job. I got laid off, but I didn't get quite laid off. They said, "Well, you can move onto this job," which in hindsight I realize was actually a business library. So, I would have been an industrial librarian. [They said,] "Or we'll give you this really neat severance package." And in my head, I was like, "Severance package, severance package, severance package." So, I didn't have a job for a while. I tried various things, it comes in handy. I was a puppeteer, I was a wilderness consultant, I was a canoe camp counselor, I worked in an after-school program, which I do not recommend. So, I did all these things and puppetry was probably my favorite. And I once saw an advertisement for a children's librarian and I was like, "Oh my God, I can do this. This is the job for me." And, of course, they didn't hire me because I had no skill. I didn't have any experience, of course, they didn't hire me. Thinking about it later, that was smart. And then I saw another job which was way low level and I said, "Alright I'm going to go get experience." And it just tumbled on from there. But it really just hit me that the job ads, when people did this in the paper, that I thought I could be a children's librarian. And I never ended up doing it, but that's okay, though I did get to end up doing story hours. That's how I ended up here, because I got laid off.

RF: Well when you say it like that it's almost--- well it is negative but it's almost like it's very negative.

MM: Well, it was in a good way. It would not have happened if I hadn't been chosen to leave my job. I would not have come here. I would have kept doing something else, miserable, although very good at it, but not happy doing it. So, I got to sort of try out a couple different things and move onto something, which maybe values the fact that I've had all this other

experience. And it's useful, I mean I could not sit in a box all day and do the same thing. So, it works out for me and yes it sounds negative, but I mean it in a good way. To not be here if that didn't happen... You know, if you think about parallel universes and if you're into that kind of stuff, which I'm not, but I kind of am... Okay there's so many different ways my life could go and I chose that one, and this is where I ended up, and it was a good choice for me.

RF: It ended being positive.

MM: Oh, yeah totally, even though it doesn't sound positive the way I say --- it ended up many years later, it ended up working out.

RF: I'm glad I had this opportunity to talk with you because, don't let anyone tell you you're not an interesting person, because I actually didn't expect you to have this range of talents and education.

MM: Well yeah you had an idea of a librarian. Do you want a tour because I love showing off my library?

RF: Yes, of course, I have time.