

Memo

To: ORL Board Members
From: Don Nettleton, CEO
Date: September 9, 2019
Re: Children's Programming Policy Discussion

Background:

The ORL has since inception, like most public libraries, offered story-time programming in our branches. Storytime is very connected to what the general public see as the core purpose of libraries which revolves around literacy and getting children interested in reading, learning, and coming to the library at an early age. We generally start off with baby-time for newborns thru to age 2, followed by story-time focusing on ages 3 -6 after which they will normally be in school. We of course also offer Summer Reading club, and other special programs like our digital training. These programs are also focused on young parents, encouraging them to read regularly to their children at home. The premise behind our offerings has been basic barrier free programming, aimed at all socio economic backgrounds and the community as a whole, offered in a safe and welcoming space. It is also of course a key plank in developing future library users and supporters.

ORL basic branch programming selection has generally been delegated to the local branch staff. We have offered training workshops for staff on how to do these well, and system support materials such as puppets and other types of books and materials. Depending upon the ages of the children,

programming may also include basic crafts or other activities, or technical equipment. Parents or caregivers are expected to remain in the branch during the program, both to help their child feel safe and supported and, as already mentioned, to encourage these parents to continue taking out books and reading with their children at home.

Why is Storytime and consideration of the need for policy direction coming to the Board at this time:

A controversial and potentially very divisive story time program has just popped up within the ORL. In the past week, our management team was made aware that our Kelowna downtown library has opted to offer Drag Queen storytelling on 2 Saturdays this fall (September 14 and November 16th). Drag Queen story-time originated in the US a few years ago and has spread throughout several public libraries in the US and is moving into some Canadian Libraries as well. The organization has rolled out of the LGBTQ movement in the US and is using this to help promote their message of gender diversity, sexual choice, and pushing the traditional boundaries of what was traditionally accepted in North American society in these areas. The group promoting it gets their website and much of their backing and promotion from the chapter in New York, although it originated out of San Francisco. The link to their website which provides further information on them is

<https://www.dragqueenstoryhour.org/>

The drag queen who will be doing the story-time in Kelowna is a local Okanagan Drag Queen artist named Miss Freida Whales.. The advertising which describes the program in Kelowna branch promotion states

Presented by Miss Freida Whales! Drag Queen Story Time is a fun program that celebrates diversity and freedom of expression! DQST helps children develop empathy, learn about gender diversity and difference, and tap into their own creativity. Come dressed to impress (costumes encouraged)!"

https://twitter.com/Kel_librarians/status/1163962816685940736

When this programming came to the attention of the ORL management team, it split the management team right down the middle. I believe that

we will have the same affect in our communities, and perhaps on the Board.

- Almost half of the leadership team was strongly in support of the library being involved in this type of programming and fully supportive of encouraging similar programs expanding throughout all our branches, which without policy direction to the contrary will likely take place. They see using the library as a front-line agent to affect societal change and part of our support of freedom of expression and diversity.
- The other half of the ORL leadership team see offering such a program targeted at 3-6 year old as inappropriate for their age, needlessly divisive to the community, and deviating from our main purpose of early literacy encouragement in a safe and neutral environment that everybody in the community will find acceptable. They feel that our expressed values of freedom of expression and information is supported by having a diverse collection to draw from which we have. But discussions related to sexual orientation, gender selection, religious teaching, politics, and other divisive issues should be promoted and debated in adult or age appropriate settings. They feel we have a danger of needlessly alienating and/or losing support from a significant section of our society by making the library and its children's programming deemed to be an unsafe environment, or one very strongly pushing a liberal political agenda to children which many will feel uncomfortable with or strongly oppose.

Question for the Board to consider:

It is important for the Board to consider at this time whether they wish to implement any policy or guidelines related to children's programming (just as policy and guidelines are implemented in regards to use of library space, meeting rooms, and what gets included within our collections).

There are several concerns that I have, and factors that I think the board need to consider which I will list below:

- The announced program, while claiming to be promoting diversity and acceptance, will be offensive to a significant segment of our society. While I can't fully predict how their reactions will be expressed, the

Board and for sure staff will at the least receive letters or calls of complaint, and may have much stronger reactions – particularly in some of our smaller branches and communities.

- We may reposition ourselves away from being an accepted, middle of the road, non-controversial (neutral) and safe environment for children’s programming in the minds of many. While they may or may not choose to express their concerns or displeasure to staff or the Board, they will be suspicious of library programming in general and may view the library as a place that they will not choose to participate in children’s programming. It is not restricted to just this one or two programs.
- Related to the above, we currently enjoy strong support from throughout the community. Surveys tend to position the library as one of the most supported public bodies and one which people strongly support funding in our communities. This type of children’s programming may decrease this broad support.
- In some communities, more radical groups have used the offering of such programs as means to stir up hatred, bigotry, and divisiveness within the community. Far from being a catalyst of acceptance for all lifestyles and beliefs, we may end up being a catalyst for polarization and bigotry. I certainly would not want to see this occur because of the Library within our communities as that is the opposite of what we have in our Library goals.
- This is taking place in a core traditional program aimed at very young children. The age of this programming will be concerning to many. Staff currently have no guidance or direction from the Board in regards to what is appropriate or inappropriate for children’s programming. This leaves the doors open to extreme interpretations on all sides. Up to now, staff have tended to keep within the safe, broadly accepted middle ground of avoiding extreme right or left or other viewpoints. This is not likely to continue, unless guidance is given to do so, as there are activist groups on all sides who are searching for ways to promote their agenda’s which may or may not be acceptable to much of society. And there will be activist librarians within our staff, either now or in the future.
- The major purpose of our children’s program, which is developing literacy and getting all families and children within our communities

loving to read may be distracted from, watered down or blocked to portions of our society that we are currently serving well.

- The Library does have as one of its goals to be inclusive and reflect the diversity of our communities within our services. This includes things like intellectual freedom, and exchanges of ideas and diverse points of view. We want to be a place where all will feel welcome to come in our doors. The question that needs answering is whether this would be accomplished through controversial young children's programming, or whether this is better done through the broad materials we offer in our collections, the welcoming of all people to access our services and be welcomed to enter and helped by staff – (regardless of their ethnicity, religion, age, wealth, social status, sexual orientation or ability) and through adult discussion groups, etc.

Recommendation of CEO

I would recommend that the Board consider providing broad policy direction to staff for Childrens programming which could consider wording something like the following. This would give general direction while still allowing staff significant leeway for interpretation and ability to evolve as society and technology and other things change over time.

“The primary goal of Children’s programming in the library is to encourage child literacy, love of learning, and introducing the Library as a safe and interesting source of lifelong learning. Accordingly, children’s programming should be provided in a manner that is safe, professional, and deemed acceptable by the bulk of society (aimed at the middle of the road) to avoid controversy and be as well accepted in the community as possible”.

This would provide direction for all children’s programming going forward. The program for November that has already been announced for Kelowna would still proceed as planned and publicized.