

Reference Librarian

Joe Eshleman

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Introduction of Joe Eshleman

Joe Eshleman became a librarian in 2007 and got his start working in college academic libraries. Previously he had worked in Libraries in North Carolina in the Charlette area before moving to Connecticut and working in the Hartford Public Library in January of 2022. Joe started in the Hartford Public Library part time as the library was in the process of rebuilding its “reference desk” and reference work, and he is now full time. From the interview Joe had told me that the library is in the process of re-working its library function for the better.

The community that Joe serves at the Hartford Public Library can be described as “inner city” based on its location within Hartford. The HPL also serves college students, sharing their library with the library for the UCCON Hartford Branch.

Theme 1: Changing Tools of the Trade & Relevancy

It is important for librarians to stay up to date on the tools of their trade so that they can provide the best help or the best work they are able to. Some advice Joe gave to me when asking what tips he has for me for my future career was to simply talk to other people in the field, the ones who are doing the job. He told me this advice because it is the people working the jobs who are in touch with the changes the most, I may be learning one tool, or archival database in school but the people working might say that the tool will be out of date and closed in 3 years. Even in the library Joe is currently working at, they had no full-time reference librarian position, or any actual librarians, before January of 2022 when the HPL started to hire them. Now the HPL is rebuilding its reference tools trying to make them better for people. One tool that Joe said he really finds useful and gets questions on is the online “chat with a librarian” feature on the HPL website. This system was put in place after the library had to close due to COVID. Joe says that this function is not widely known or pushed out to the public, but he still receives 1 – 2 reference questions from the chat a week.

For Joe and the positions, he has worked in, in academic and now a public library, there are many tools at his disposal that allow him to do his job and do a good one. Something Joe brought up quite a bit about his reference work is that he will sometimes contact the Connecticut State Library to access resources from there that they do not have at the Hartford Public Library (HPL). A reference question from a high school student had come in and they were looking for the exact date that the capital of

CT switched from New Haven to Hartford. Joe had said that he had looked for a long time at this one before also asking for assistance from the State Library who he thought would have some better records. Joe also gets help from the history center that is also in the HPL, he says he gets help from them on the more rigorous historical reference questions. Working at the Hartford Library Joe also has access to a newspaper called the Hartford Current, Joe has access to a historical backlog of the newspapers and says that he uses them sometimes for historical questions about Hartford and CT.

Joe also utilizes the web for reference questions, along with databases and .gov websites. Joe had mentioned how it is increasingly difficult to find quality information on the web these days. This is a problem I am running into myself-trying to look up news or information about an election or the current war in Ukraine there is a lot out there and it is unchecked and changing all the time. Joe had mentioned in the interview how he tries to avoid the .com sites when he can and only uses .gov primarily and .org on occasion.

The HPL had undergone a lot of changes in how it serves the community, Joe had mentioned how the library is feeling more like a community center than a traditional library, and I had that same feeling when I went to do this interview. Both Joe and I agree that this is not a bad thing, the HPL is now able to serve a lot more people with a variety of services such as a digital makers space, Joe said that this is a place for people to work on digital projects such as pod casts, film editing/making, working on making videogames, and teaching people tools for our digital world. Along with teaching Joe had mentioned all the programs that the library offers in teaching people new skills. One of the more obscure services the library has is being able to issue a State ID, allowing someone to have an ID and not have to get a driver's license.

Theme 2: Culture & Community

Something that has come up a lot in IST 605 & 511, as well as in the Reference Interview with Joe, is the topic of culture and community. The community at the HPL is very diverse with users of all ages, race, and ethnic background, while I was in there, I saw young kids with their parents looking at books and the computers, I saw college and high school students doing schoolwork at the many desks, I saw an older gentleman talking very loudly on one of the libraries public access phones. The library during the time of the interview was also very busy and packed, so much so that it was hard for Joe to find a free room for the interview. There were people working in the quiet group rooms that had white boards or projectors that were hooked up to their laptops. On the surface, and from what Joe was telling me the library is very inclusive to its community and caters to them, that is one of the reasons Joe calls the HPL more of a community center than a library.

One thing that Joe brought up about the topic of cultural competency is that he is still relatively new to the Hartford Area having moved from and work in Charlotte North

Carolina. He said that there is a West Indian community and a large Puerto Rican community in Hartford that uses the library, and often speaks a different language. Hartford has a very large Puerto Rican community and every year there is a Puerto Rican day parade and festival in the city that is very fun walk around the city and see everything. He mentioned that he himself is not able to speak the language, but he works with people who do speak the language and are from those communities. He says that he will lean on those people when in need who better understand the communities, until he himself learns enough to help on his own. I can relate this this part about being new, I am new to this field and when I find a place to work, I will be in a new community, so hearing that Joe is able to seek help from others within those communities is reassuring. It is one thing to learn about cultural competency in classes and to learn how to handle these situations but hearing it from a library professional is another thing.

Another thing Joe had said was “the better you understand the cultures the better the reference questions you can ask someone”. He also describes this as a long process. Learning about different cultures can seem like a lot of work, but it is an important step to being able to understand your users, the people who are coming into your library and using its resources. If we as librarians are unable to understand our local communities how can those communities understand and use the library resources, they may not be geared towards them? It is topics and questions like these that are important to think about and understand.

Theme 3: The Reference Questions

Currently writing this paper in week 6 of IST 605, I have learned a lot about reference work, the tools of the trade, how to help people, understanding cultures and the user needs, equal accessibility for users, and communities. From the interview Joe went over many different types of reference queries he gets while working at a public library. It is one thing to come up with a user and reference question for our reference portfolio project, but it was another to hear the types of questions that Joe gets and how he goes about answering them.

A couple reference questions Joe mentioned that stood out was, first a high school student needing help with a history project, and the other involved a man asking about an orange. The high school student needed historical information regarding the changing of Connecticut’s state capital from New Haven to Hartford. The student wanted to know the exact date for this question, Joe put in a lot of leg work trying to find the answer but was unable to find an exact date of exchange. The other question about the orange was a reference question that had come in over the phone. A man had called asking if it was okay for people to consume orange seeds and if there would be any health complications. After answering this question, which was “no, it is perfectly okay to eat them” Joe had asked others “what are his liabilities?”. I used these two examples because these two are so drastically different. The resources Joe had to use are different, one he used archived and digitized records of a newspaper the Hartford

Current, and he also asked around at the CT State Library, while for the other he went online and browsed medical websites. The way he received the reference questions was also different, one in person the other over the phone, the people asking the questions. The high school student had explained the project, how he couldn't find the information, and exactly what he was looking for, while the other person simply called in his question. I am the type of person who will learn something and say, "when will I ever use that" and instantly forget it, but after my interview with Joe and learning just how much variety there is in the questions, he gets it goes to show the importance of everything. Even though I do not want to work as a reference librarian and would like to pursue a museum or archival setting I am sure there will still be times I will need to answer or help answer questions from people.

Final Reflection:

I want to start this reflection by saying that this project really helped to put what we are learning in class into the perspective of the real world. I mentioned above that I am a person who will question the use of what I am learning and having done the interview and heard Joe's stories and what his job is all about as a librarian I now understand. Even though I wish to work in an archival setting or with a museum there were many overlaps with that work while I was interviewing Joe. One thing that came up was digitization and how everything is transitioning to online with databases and catalogs. When I asked Joe what the one tool a rookie librarian would need to work solo at the reference desk, he had told me that really there is no longer simply one thing. He had mentioned that the idea of the reference librarian at the desk with their encyclopedia and facts on file, to him, was outdated. While I am sure that is not the case everywhere, it fits with in our changing digital world. I believe that this change will just keep happening, with more things becoming easier to get online people will naturally go online first to check information. This interview with Joe at the Hartford Public has given me insight into the future of librarian work along with what we are learning in class. It has only reassured me that going into the archival and museum field to help bring artifacts and records closer to people is important work and work I look forward to doing.