

Searching and Finding at the High School Library

Late last fall, during my Tuesday shifts at the Brookline High School Library circulation desk, I began to notice Marina*, a sophomore. She signed into the library every week during her supposedly mandatory Advisory block and stayed through the next period and lunch. I found Marina sweet...and suspected something shifty might be going on. Throughout the fall and winter Marina never asked the librarians for anything other than a library pass; I don't think she really noticed that we are four different librarians. (She referred to all of us mostly-bespectacled white ladies by one of our names--and it wasn't mine.) I wasn't sure what this student needed from the library during those long weekly visits, and whether she found it. She became a poster child for my ongoing question of how our library can best welcome and serve students whose needs may stretch beyond the academic, while still providing top-notch support for learning and teaching at BHS.

Some students come to the library with demands that are specific, if not always easy to meet. In a 40 minute block at the circulation desk, I might

* names and identifying details have been changed to protect student privacy

encounter a junior in search of an online copy of the *Massachusetts Driver's Manual* (which I sincerely hope they won't consult on a phone while driving), a freshman looking for an eraser and a suggestion for a good read about serial killers, one of our library volunteers hoping to discuss how to launch an after-school book club for students "who like to read but don't want to be told what to think about what they read," a senior who apparently won't graduate unless we immediately locate the official final shooting script for the film *Pulp Fiction*, and a sophomore attempting to track down a copy of the 1809 Swedish *Constitution*, especially the portions dealing with freedom of the press, in English translation. When I find it, there's no time for a fist pump, because that freshman from before is back, looking for his missing retainer. Luckily, I'm really good at finding things, if I know what I'm looking for.

But many students are searching for something elusive in the BHS library. While annual surveys give us important but superficial data on reasons students use the library - printing, getting help finding a good book, doing research, working with friends--they don't give us the deeper story of which students in a given block might be using the library as a refuge from social

pressures, a retreat from academic expectations, an eye in the hurricane known as high school.

I think back to my own experiences in school libraries--what I needed, what I found. Like Marina, I don't remember paying much attention to my elementary or high school *librarians*, but their *libraries* were sure important to me. In third grade I was allowed to take out *Green Eyes*, a picture book way below my reading level, week after week. I don't know what I was working through by reading and rereading the colorfully illustrated transformation of a kitten to a cat on a bucolic farm, but the bibliotherapy apparently worked. I recall my high school library less for research help or an introduction to great literature, and more for the sublimation I found reading cookbooks when I was on some crazy diet or another, and for the big tables downstairs where I could chat (very quietly, of course) with friends.

I do remember my junior high librarian, because she was a witch. Not a euphemistic witch, but a practicing Wiccan. She taught an extracurricular class on witchcraft, and it still baffles me that this got past the school board

in suburban Minnesota. (FYI, the love sachet she taught me to make was woefully ineffective.) I also remember that the junior high library offered books in many genres that were new to me. I was able to survive the awkwardness of early adolescence through reading fiction of all kinds. In the process, I learned about history, imagined different worlds, found role models, and developed compassion for people different than myself.

One of my library professors was fond of saying that a wonderful thing about being a librarian is bringing our whole lives to the job. I can connect the dots from the empathy nurtured by reading in childhood and beyond, to the nuggets of wisdom gained from my varied life experiences, to now supporting students--like when my colleagues and I grew concerned about all the time Marina spent in the library. We talked to her dean, and happily, this didn't alienate Marina. She continued visiting the library regularly, though with a little more oversight and accountability. She started asking for help here and there. She still couldn't really tell the librarians apart.

As I helped Marina find books for research and pleasure reading, I learned bits and pieces about her family's harrowing history and losses during

conflicts in their country, which led to their immigration. I appreciated how much Marina valued her culture and wanted to learn about the history that had deeply affected those she loved. I mentioned to Marina's English teacher that I enjoyed connecting with this student in her library visits. It seemed to me that she was a bright, resilient teen--though perhaps a reluctant student. Her teacher noted that Marina chafed against the strict limits set by her concerned, traditional parents, and was becoming increasingly disobedient at home and school. It occurred to me that she could do worse than playing hooky in the library.

The last time I saw Marina during the year, she made an appointment with me to study for an English test on Shakespeare. One of her teachers stopped by to ensure that we were working together. When she saw Marina and I huddled at a carrel, she gave Marina a supportive squeeze and told her she was happy she'd made it to the library. I think we all were.

Despite what I've heard students mutter under their breath, no witches work at the BHS Library. We can cast no spells to make the library a charmed respite where students find what they need--academic, social,

emotional, and more--when they walk through the door. I don't have a wand to wave over the loud kids and the mousy kids, the bros and the geeks, the driven learners and the driven socializers--to harmonize their varied identities, styles, and needs. I can produce bandaids, glue sticks, scratch-and-sniff bookmarks (popcorn! cotton candy!), many varieties of tape, white-out, and safety pins for clothing malfunctions, but I can't whip up love sachets and scatter them around the library to ensure that all the kids crowded into our limited space treat one another kindly and no one gets hurt.

Instead, I manufacture my own mojo from components like professional expertise, teamwork with my librarian work-wives, support from colleagues outside the library, constant vigilance, and more "shushing" than I wish were ever called for. Creating a welcoming library takes collective sweat and the occasional big wet tear.

But then Marina pushes through the doors and says, "Ms. Mains, will you help me?" Maybe there is indeed magic in circulation at the library.