

Librarian Interview

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LIBR 282-01 Mongelli
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Location of interview: California State Prison – Solano
Senior Librarian: Helene Kosher
Date of interview: February 20, 2010 (Saturday)
Time of interview: 8:30am – 10:30am

I set up my interview several weeks in advance to give Mrs. Kosher time to have my background check completed and my visitor's pass cleared. Mrs. Kosher was pleased to have me visit her at the prison and she even offered to have me stay all day. While I would have loved to stay all day, I had an appointment at 11:00am that I could not miss.

Prior to the interview Mrs. Kosher and I talked on the phone about the interview and about what I wanted to accomplish. I explained the 14 principles of correctional library management to her and explained that I would like to observe how these principles play out in the library she manages. From the start Mrs. Kosher was welcoming, encouraging, and honest.

Principle 6= Service Philosophy: a Therapy/Positive-Recreational Hybrid

Q1: What is your service philosophy? Can it be summed up as "Give the inmates what they want," "Give the inmates what they need," or a combination?

A1: Mrs. Kosher's philosophy aligns with "Give them what they need." She focuses on the legal information that the inmates need every day. She also believes in RAC or Random Acts of Kindness because they make someone's day at least once a day.

Q2: How long have you been working for your department? What are some of the things that made you choose Correctional librarianship?

A2: Mrs. Kosher has been working for the Department of Corrections since 1994 and has been Senior Librarian for 4 years. When we talked about her decision to enter correctional librarianship she said she really didn't set out to be a correctional librarian. She was looking for a better paying position and she wanted to relocate to a job that was closer to home. She happened to find the posting for librarian with DOC and has been there ever since.

Principle 2= Correctional Librarian: Prison Employee 1st/Librarian 2nd

Q3: What security responsibilities do you have? Do these responsibilities hinder or help your work?

A3: Mrs. Kosher carries a ring of keys that get her through a series of doors and in and out of closets within the libraries. The keys hinder Mrs. Kosher's work because she has to be constantly aware of where her keys are and what has been unlocked. She told me she would prefer not to have the responsibility but that she accepts it because it comes with the job.

Principle 11= Library programs help change lives

Q4: Do you offer therapeutic programming?

A4: Helene Kosher does offer therapeutic programming, but she does not facilitate the programs. Inmate clerks facilitate all the programs and guest speakers come in to supplement programming. Helene also makes sure to interview clerks interested in facilitating so that she can determine whether or not they are fit to lead a discussion groups. She tries to limit discussion groups to 3-4 inmates. Programs range from book clubs to bibliotherapy, and there are even clubs for speakers of foreign languages. In this library there is a large focus on Native American materials and programming.

Principle 13= Humor-As-Therapy minimizes prison negativity

Q5: How important do you think a sense of humor is to your work?

A5: Helene's answer to this question was the highlight of my visit. She said absolutely humor plays a major role in her job and survival in the prison. From what I observed she has a great relationship with all the inmate clerks. They treat her with respect and they are polite and work driven. She pulled out a rubber band and said, "This is a running joke we have here in the library." Then she proceeded to aim the rubber band at one of her clerks and he quickly darted behind the stacks where he would not be a target. They both laughed and went on about their work. The clerk was not offended nor was he upset that she showed me her sense of humor towards him.

Principle 2= Correctional Librarian: Prison Employee 1st/Librarian 2nd

Q6: Do you consider yourself a Correctional employee first? Or are you a librarian in a prison?

A6: Even after explaining to Helene what this question meant, she had a hard time answering it. Even her CO nodded his head and said, "Now, that's a good question." After some thinking she said, "Since I am a librarian, and that is what I do, I consider myself a librarian first." And then I reminded her of all the security responsibilities that go along with "what she does" and still she said because she provides library services for the inmates she is a librarian first.

Principle 14= Carefully-selected library material is socialization, not 'censorship'

Q7: Do you see yourself as a censor of material? Do you have problems limiting the inmates to certain material, or do you see that as a necessary part of your work?

A7: While Helene doesn't see herself as a censor of material, she does have a problem limiting the inmates to certain material. She recognizes there are mandates, but she views having to follow them as "torture."

Principle 7= Correctional Officers make/break library services

Q8: Do you have officers assigned to the library or assigned nearby? Is your relationship with them amiable or adversarial?

A8: Yes and his name is Officer Rodriguez. He is assigned to the library he and Helene have been working together for four years. Officer Rodriguez's official title is Library Custody Officer. I witnessed him assist Helene with minor tasks around the library, he escorted inmates to and from the library, he locked and unlocked doors and closets (making sure to ask permission from Helene first), and he assisted with monitoring the copy station.

Principle 10= Law libraries help the indigent/wrongly accused/unjustly convicted/civilly injured

Q9: How much of your time is taken up by law library services? Do you teach the inmates how to use the law library?

A9: 75% of Helene's time is held up by the law library. She has a background in law librarianship so this part of her job comes naturally. She tries to let the inmate clerks do all the teaching when it comes to assisting inmate patrons with the law library. There are several "help yourself manuals" in the law library that patrons can use to learn important procedures, policies, and terminology. Helene's strategy is that she steps in only when it is absolutely necessary – she has complete trust and confidence in her clerks.

Principle 9= Trained clerks = good library services

Q10: How many inmate clerks do you have working for you? How many professional librarians are working with you?

A10: Helene has 14 inmate clerks working with her. At the time of my visit there was one other librarian working with her on a temporary term. Because of the nature of corrections Helene has had a hard time keeping professional librarians on staff. Helene herself is a tough woman and handles her work environment very well (while still maintaining a great working relationship with her inmate staff).

Principle 3= Library Roles: Management Tool/Program Support/Socialization

Q11: What seems to be the most consistent inmate complaint about library services at this institution?

A11: Helene says inmates don't like it when the library is closed, no matter the reason. The inmates appreciate the time they get to spend in the library and feel underserved when they can't access it. No matter how often the library is open and available the inmates feel they never have enough access.

Q12: What kind of advancement opportunities exist for a CDCR librarian?

A12: "There are none, really."

Overall, I was satisfied with my visit and Helene gave me a new understanding of what it means to be a correctional librarian. Her interactions with the inmates (both clerks and patrons) was fascinating as she was familiar with all but one inmate that was in the library during my visit. When I asked her for advice as I get ready to graduate from library school she said to look for alternatives other than correctional librarianship. She said that I should consider this specialty a last resort. I took her advice to heart and will sincerely consider her words of wisdom as I begin my journey into the world of libraries. Prison is a scary place, and if I've learned anything this semester it's that a correctional librarian must have a level head, a compassionate soul, a willingness to admit faults, and a firm hand (while being fair enough to keep the inmates and prison administration happy).